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THE CAT'S PAW

By NATALIE SUMNER LINCOLN

THE CAT'S PAW
THE UNSEEN EAR
THE THREE STRINGS
THE MOVING FINGER
THE NAMELESS MAN
THE OFFICIAL CHAPERON
THE LOST DESPATCH
THE RED SEAL
I SPY
C. O. D.
THE MAN INSIDE
THE TREVOR CASE

187 J

DROPPING THE CAT, SHE SPRANG TO HER FEET WITH A SLIGHT CRY.
[page 27]

THE CAT'S PAW

BY

NATALIE SUMNER LINCOLN

AUTHOR OF "THE RED SEAL," "THE UNSEEN EAR,"
"THE TREVOR CASE," "THE MOVING FINGER," ETC.

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
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TO

EDNA LEIGHTON TYLER

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THE CAT'S PAW

CHAPTER I

KITTY!

MISS SUSAN BAIRD let her gaze rest on her companion in speculative silence. Apparently, her last jibe had failed of its mark, judging from the man's unchanged expression. With a vexed sigh she proceeded to pour out another cup of tea.

They were an oddly matched pair. Miss Baird, still erect in spite of her seventy years, her small slight figure tucked into one corner of the carved, throne-shaped chair which was her habitual seat when in her library, appeared dwarfed in comparison with the broad-shouldered, powerfully built man who faced her across the tea table.

"So you wish to marry my niece, Kitty," she remarked. *"You!"* And she broke into shrill laughter.

Her companion flushed hotly. Her ridicule cut deeper than had any of her previous comments.

"I intend to marry her," he answered, and the stubborn determination of his tone matched his set features.

"So!" Miss Baird shrugged her thin shoulders. "You forget, my friend, that until Kitty is twenty-five years of age, I am her legal guardian, and that she is absolutely dependent upon me."

"You give her a home and let her work that she may contribute to your support," he retorted.

At his words her eyes blazed in fury and her talonlike fingers fumbled in the silver bowl for the few pieces of sugar it contained.

"I am her only blood relation. It is fitting and proper that she aid me in my old age," she exclaimed. "My poverty," she paused, and a certain dignity crept into both voice and manner, "is my misfortune."

"And Kitty," he began, but got no further.

"We will not discuss Kitty," she announced with finality. "Wait," as he started to interrupt her. "Such discussion is totally unnecessary, for Kitty will never marry you."

"Why not?"

"For two excellent reasons." She spoke with deliberation. "Kitty shall not marry a poor man, nor shall she marry a man with an hereditary taint."

The man regarded her steadfastly across the table, his strong capable hands still holding the peach which he had been peeling. The silence lengthened, but neither seemed inclined to break it. Suddenly, the man laid down the peach and taking out his handkerchief, passed it across his lips; then, still in silence, he picked up the fruit knife, cut the peach in two and, placing the fruit in front of Miss Baird, rose and left the library.

In the outer hall he paused long enough to pick up his hat and gloves from the table where he had placed them upon his arrival some time before. He had opened the front door and was about to step outside when it occurred to him to light a cigarette. To do so, he released his hold on the front door. His cigarette was just commencing to draw nicely when a current of air from an opened window across the hall blew the door, which he had left ajar, shut with a resounding bang.

As the noise vibrated through the silent house, the man glanced nervously over his shoulder. Evidently, it had not disturbed Miss Baird or the other inmates of her household, for no one appeared in the hall. He once more started to approach the front door when he heard, through the portières in front of the entrance to the library, Miss Baird's voice raised in anger.

"Kitty!" she called. "Kitty!"

As the name echoed through the silent hall, it gave place to a scream of such intensity, such horror that the man drew back aghast. It was some minutes before he moved. With faltering footsteps he retraced his way into the library and paused by the tea table.

Miss Susan Baird still sat in her throne-shaped chair, but the light fell full on her glazing eyes and distorted features.

Slowly, reluctantly, the man bent nearer and forced himself to place his hand upon her wrist. He could feel no pulse. When he stood erect a moment later, his forehead was beaded with perspiration. Dazedly, he glanced about the library—he and the dead woman were its only occupants.

Again he compelled himself to gaze at her, and subconsciously took note of her poor and patched attire. The incongruity of her string of pearls and the diamond rings upon her fingers impressed him even in the presence of death.

Step by step he retreated backward across the room, his glance roaming upward toward the gallery which circled the library and the short staircase leading to it, but always his eyes returned to that still and lonely figure by the tea table.

A few minutes later the faint sound of the front door being closed disturbed a large ball of fur. A

gray Angora cat jumped from its hiding place and, with its back arched in fright, scampered through the portières, and fled along the hall and up the staircase to the attic.

CHAPTER II

THE SUMMONS

THE broad streets of Washington City presented a lively scene as Dr. Leonard McLean drove his car with increasing slowness down Connecticut Avenue, crowded with government employees hastening to their offices. The congestion was even greater than usual owing to the downpour of rain as the drenched pedestrians swarmed around the street car stops in their endeavor to board cars, already packed to their limit, and arrive promptly at nine o'clock at their various destinations.

McLean slowed down to a stop within the fifteen feet limit prescribed by law, as the street car ahead of him halted to take on passengers, and watched with interest the futile efforts of the conductor to prevent the desperate rush made by both men and women to get through the car door at the same time. Suddenly, McLean discerned a familiar face in the

crowd before him and sounded his horn. The unexpected "honk" created confusion among those unable to find even clinging room, and the conductor, taking advantage of the diversion, signaled to the motorman and the car sped onward.

"Hey, Leigh!" hailed McLean. "Leigh Wallace!"

Major Wallace glanced around and with a wave of his hand McLean indicated the vacant seat in his roadster.

"Hop in!" he exclaimed, as Wallace hurried across the intervening space between the car and the curbstone. "I'll give you a lift downtown," and, hardly waiting for Wallace to seat himself and close the door, the busy surgeon released the clutch and the roadster sped down Connecticut Avenue.

It was not until they were clear of traffic and were approaching the intersection of Twenty-first Street and Massachusetts Avenue that McLean realized his companion had not returned his greeting or addressed a word to him since entering the car. Turning his head, he eyed him unobtrusively. Wallace sat moodily staring ahead; his big frame, slumped in the easiest posture, seemed to fill the broad seat of the Packard. McLean took silent note of Wallace's expression and the unhealthy pallor of his skin.

"Get any sleep last night?" he asked.

"Not much." Wallace drew out a leather wallet

from an inside pocket and produced a prescription. "The druggist refused to fill this again; said I had to get another prescription. Beastly rot," he complained. "Cost me a bad night."

The surgeon ran his eye over the prescription before pocketing it.

"It's a narcotic," he explained. "The druggists are not allowed to refill. Next time you want one come to me. How long is it since you left Walter Reed Hospital, Leigh?"

"Two months ago," was the laconic rejoinder. Wallace removed his hat and passed his hand over his short-clipped hair. "I hope to report for duty soon."

"Good!" McLean slowed down to make the turn from Twenty-first Street into Massachusetts Avenue and as they drove westward Major Wallace for the first time took notice of the direction in which they were heading and that they were no longer on Connecticut Avenue.

"Aren't you going to your office, McLean?" he inquired.

"Not immediately. I have a professional call to make first. Are you in a hurry?"

The question seemed superfluous and McLean smiled as he put it. The major's apathetic manner and relaxed figure could not be associated with haste.

"No," Wallace answered. "I promised to stop in and see Charles Craige some time this morning; he's attending to some legal business for me. Otherwise I have nothing to do. This killing time gets on my nerves—look at that, now," and he held up a hand that was not quite steady. "Take me on as chauffeur, McLean. I understand an engine; shell-shock hasn't knocked that out of my head."

"Your head's all right, old man. I told you that when you were my patient at Walter Reed," responded McLean cheerily. "A few weeks more and—" He stopped speaking as they crossed the Q Street bridge into Georgetown, then, stepping on the accelerator, he raced the car up the steeply graded street and drew up in front of a high terrace.

"Hello, are you going to 'Rose Hill'?" demanded Wallace, wakened from his lethargy by the stopping of the car. He had apparently been unaware that McLean had left his last sentence unfinished. "Who is ill?"

"I don't know." McLean leaned back to pick up his instrument bag which he carried in the compartment behind his seat. "My servant called to me just as I was leaving home that I had been telephoned to come over here at once. I didn't catch all she said. I suppose Kitty Baird is ill. That girl is a bundle of nerves."

Wallace clambered out of the car so that his more

nimble companion would not have to climb over his long legs in getting out. As McLean turned to close the door of his car, Wallace's hand descended heavily upon his shoulder.

"What—who—who's that standing in the Baird's doorway?" he gasped. "A policeman?"

McLean swung around and glanced up at the house. A long flight of stone steps led up to the front door and a landing marked each break in the terrace whereon grew rosebushes. It was the picturesque garden which gave its name to the fine old mansion—Rose Hill. The mansion had been built in colonial times when the surrounding land, on which stood modern houses and the present-day streets, had been part of the "plantation" owned by General Josiah Baird of Revolutionary fame. The hand of progress had left the mansion perched high above the graded street, but it had not touched its fine air of repose, nor diminished the beauty of its classic Greek architecture.

Standing under the fanlight over the doorway was the burly form of a blue-coated policeman.

"Yes, that's one of the 'City's finest,' " he laughed. "What of it?" he added, observing his companion's agitation in astonishment. "The policeman is probably taking the census; one called on me last Saturday."

Wallace swallowed hard. "That's it," he mumbled, rather than spoke. "You've hit it."

McLean, conscious of the bleak wind which accompanied the driving rain, stopped to open the door of his roadster.

"Wait in the car, Leigh; I won't be long." Not pausing to see if his suggestion was followed, McLean hurried up the steps.

Wallace plucked at the collar of his overcoat and opened it with nervous fingers, mechanically closed the car door, and then with slow reluctant feet followed McLean toward the mansion. He was breathing heavily when he gained the surgeon's side, and the latter's surprised exclamation at sight of him was checked by the policeman who had advanced a few steps to meet the two men.

"Dr. McLean?" he asked, and as the surgeon nodded, added, "Step inside, Sir." He touched his hat respectfully. "Is this gentleman with you, Doctor?"

"Why, certainly." McLean glanced inquiringly at the policeman; the latter's manner indicated suppressed excitement. "What's to pay, Officer?"

"They'll tell you inside," waving his hand toward the open door. "The coroner's there."

"Coroner!" McLean's bag nearly slipped from his hand; but before he could question the policeman further, his name was called from the back of the

hall and he hurried inside the house. Coroner Penfield stood by the portières in front of the library door.

"I am glad you could get here so promptly, McLean," he said. "Come in," and he drew the portières to one side. McLean entered the library hastily and continued to advance with his usual brisk tread until he caught sight of a huddled figure in the throne-shaped chair.

"Good God!" he ejaculated and retreated a few steps. Recovering his usual calm poise he walked around the tea table and examined the body. When he straightened up and turned around, he found Coroner Penfield's attention was centered on Major Leigh Wallace.

Wallace had followed McLean across the threshold of the library only, and stood with his back braced against the doorjamb while his eyes mutely scrutinized every movement made by the surgeon.

"Well?" he questioned, and McLean's stare grew intensified. If he had not seen Wallace's lips move he would never have recognized his voice. With difficulty Wallace enunciated his words. "Well—what—what is it?"

"It's a case of—"

"Sudden death." Coroner Penfield completed McLean's sentence.

In the silence that followed, a man who had been

leaning over the railing of the gallery which circled the library, watching them, walked over to the stairs and came slowly down. At sound of his footsteps McLean glanced up and recognized Inspector Mitchell of the Central Office. He bowed courteously to the surgeon before addressing the coroner.

"If it is all right, Dr. Penfield, we'll have the body removed," he said. "My men are here."

"Certainly. Call them." Penfield turned to McLean. "I wanted you to be present as I understand you attended Miss Susan Baird."

"Yes, I have been her family physician for years." McLean spoke with an effort, his thoughts centered on one idea. "Where is Miss Baird's niece, Miss Kitty Baird?"

His question went unanswered. Apparently Coroner Penfield and Inspector Mitchell failed to hear him as they busied themselves in superintending the removal of the body. McLean, after watching them for some seconds, walked over to Wallace. The latter took no notice of him whatever, his eyes remaining always on the tea table. McLean scanned his drawn face and listened to his labored breathing with growing concern. Whirling around, he opened his bag, took out a flask, detached its silver cup and poured out a liberal allowance of whisky, then, darting out of the library, he returned an instant later with some water in a glass. Slightly diluting the

whisky, he thrust the cup against Wallace's white lips.

"Drink that," he ordered, and Wallace followed his peremptory command. "Now, sit down," and he half-pushed, half-supported him to a large leather covered lounge.

"I—I," protested Wallace. "I'm a bit undone, McLean," and he raised miserable, apologetic eyes to his friend.

"Sure, it's enough to bowl any one over," McLean acknowledged, with a sympathetic pat. "Even the strongest—"

"Which I am not," supplemented Wallace. The powerful stimulant was taking effect, and he spoke with more composure. "Have you—can you—" he hesitated, and cast a sidelong glance at McLean. "Can you learn any details about Miss Baird and how she came to be lying in that chair?" It was impossible for him to suppress a shudder as he indicated the empty throne-shaped chair. "She was dead, wasn't she?"

"As dead as a door nail." His question was answered by Inspector Mitchell, who had returned in time to catch their last few remarks. "Can you give me any facts about Miss Baird, Doctor McLean?"

"Only that she was a lifelong resident of Georgetown and a well-known character—known for her

eccentricities, that is," responded McLean. "Her death has come as a great shock to Major Wallace and to me, Inspector."

"When did you see her last?" inquired Mitchell. His question was addressed to both men, but it was McLean who answered it after a moment's thought.

"She was in my office on Friday."

"Was she ill?"

"No. For a woman of her age she was remarkably free from organic trouble," replied McLean. "In fact, she did not come to consult me about herself at all, but to ask for a tonic for her niece. By the way, where is Miss Kitty Baird?"

At the question Wallace raised his head and eyed the surgeon intently for a second, then dropped his eyes as the other felt his gaze and turned toward him.

"Where is Miss Kitty Baird?" Mitchell repeated the surgeon's question. "Blessed if I know."

"What!" McLean started from the chair where he had seated himself a moment before. "Do you mean to say that Miss Kitty Baird is not in her bedroom?"

"I do." Mitchell shook a puzzled head. "And she isn't in any part of the house. My men and I have searched it thoroughly. We found only the dead woman in the house and a live Angora cat."

McLean stared at the inspector in dumbfounded

amazement. A gurgling sound from the sofa caused him to look at Wallace. The major, with purpling face, was struggling to undo his collar.

"Air! Air!" he gasped, and before the surgeon could spring to his aid, he sank back unconscious against the sofa pillows.

CHAPTER III

DETAILS

INSPECTOR Mitchell and Dr. McLean watched the taxicab, in which rode Major Leigh Wallace and Coroner Penfield, until it passed out of sight on its way to Washington, before reëntering the Baird mansion.

"Major Wallace seems in bad shape," commented Mitchell, as they crossed the hall toward the library. "I though you would never bring him back to consciousness, Doctor."

"This library wasn't a pleasant sight for well man to encounter, Mitchell, let alone a man in the major's condition," replied McLean. "The results of shell-shock do not exactly prepare a man for this—" and with a wave of his hand the surgeon indicated the tea table and the throne-shaped chair where Miss Baird's body had lain on their entrance three quarters of an hour before.

"Eh, yes; but I should have thought the major's

experiences overseas would have accustomed him to gruesome scenes." Mitchell paused in front of the portières and adjusted them carefully so that they completely covered the doorway.

"Walking into a room and finding a friend lying dead is a shock, regardless of any past experience," responded McLean dryly.

"Did Major Wallace know Miss Baird well?" inquired Mitchell.

"Know her well?" repeated McLean. "Yes, and her niece, Kitty Baird, even better, if rumor speaks truly."

A certain inflection in the surgeon's voice caused Mitchell to eye him sharply, but McLean's attention was entirely centered on the tea table before which he was standing, and he appeared unaware of the inspector's scrutiny.

"Exactly what do you mean, Doctor?" asked the latter. "Your words would imply—"

"Nothing—except that rumor has it that Leigh Wallace and Kitty Baird are engaged to be married." McLean balanced one hand on a chair and tipped it back and forth.

"And what is your *personal* opinion, Doctor?" asked Mitchell shrewdly.

McLean hesitated. "I am not quite so certain," he admitted. "Three months ago I believed Wallace and Kitty were engaged; then—"

"Yes?—" as McLean paused once more in his speech.

"Then Kitty met Edward Rodgers of San Francisco," McLean smiled. "It's a toss-up which man wins."

"So." The inspector considered a moment. "So Miss Baird is still willing to take a chance on marrying Major Wallace, is she?"

"What d'ye mean?" McLean's abstracted manner disappeared instantly.

"Well, I wouldn't exactly like my daughter to marry him," retorted Mitchell. "Not after seeing his condition here to-day. I haven't much medical knowledge—"

"Quite so." The surgeon's dry tone caused Mitchell to redden. "I can assure you, Mitchell, that Major Wallace's ill-health is but temporary."

"Is it?" Mitchell eyed him reflectively, then as an idea occurred to him his expression altered. "By Jove! Perhaps it wasn't the sight of Miss Baird lying there dead which knocked him out, but the absence of her niece, Miss Kitty Baird."

McLean let the chair, which he had been balancing on two legs, go slowly back to its proper position.

"It is just possible that you are right," he agreed. "Kitty Baird's absence has alarmed me also."

"Is that so? You kept mighty calm about it,"

grumbled Mitchell. McLean was not evincing much interest. "Possibly you don't realize that Miss Baird did not die a natural death."

McLean smiled ironically. "You pay me a poor compliment," he said. "I only made a superficial examination of her body, but it assured me that a—" he hesitated for a brief second, "that a tragedy had occurred."

"Tragedy!" In fine scorn. "Why mince words? Say murder."

"No." McLean spoke with provoking deliberation. "Suicide."

"Suicide!" echoed the inspector. "Bah! Look at this room."

Obediently McLean glanced about the library. It was a large room, almost square in shape, two stories in height with an arched roof containing a stained glass skylight. It was paneled in Flemish oak; and oak bookcases, with sliding glass doors, filled most of the wall space, while a gallery, on a level with the second story, circled the library. Access to the gallery was gained from the library by a flight of circular steps near the huge brick chimney which stood at the farther end of the room. Bookcases, similar in type to those on the main floor of the library, were in the gallery, and McLean scarcely glanced upward; instead, his eyes roved over the worn furniture with its shabby upholstery, the faded

rugs on the hardwood floor, until finally his gaze rested on the tea table. Given to observation of little things, he noticed the spotless condition of the tea cloth and the neat darns in one corner. Inspector Mitchell observed his silent contemplation of the tea table.

"Evidently Miss Baird was enjoying a cup of tea," he remarked. "See, her cup is half full."

"Have you analyzed its contents?" asked McLean.

"Not yet." Mitchell moved impatiently. "Give us time, Doctor. It won't take long to locate the criminal. He is sure to have left a clue behind him among the tea things."

"You will insist on murder!" McLean shrugged his shoulders. "I see only one cup of tea," pointing to the table. "A teapot—is it empty?" He stretched out his hand to pick it up, but Mitchell checked him with an imperative gesture.

"Don't handle anything, Sir," he cautioned. "We are making tests for finger prints."

"Quite right." McLean's hand dropped to his side. "Well, murder presupposes the presence of some one beside the victim. I see only one teacup, one plate with two sandwiches and a piece of cake, another plate with a half-eaten peach. Not a very bountiful repast. Now, while Miss Baird was poor, she was hospitable, inspector; had any one been here,

her visitor would have been provided with a cup of tea at least."

"Perhaps—but suppose she wasn't aware of the, er, visitor's presence?" asked Mitchell.

McLean eyed him in silence for a second. "Have you found any indication of another's presence?" he questioned. "Any clues?"

"Nothing worth mentioning now," responded Mitchell, evasively. "Can you give me the name of an intimate friend to whom Miss Baird may have gone?"

"Why, certainly; there's—let me see—" McLean pulled himself up short. Who were Kitty Baird's intimate friends—her girl friends? He could enumerate dozens of men whose admiration for her was sincere and unconcealed, but when it came to the girls in their set—pshaw! women were cats! Kitty's popularity had not endeared her to her own sex.

"You might try Mrs. Amos Parsons," he suggested, and pointed to the telephone table in a corner of the library. "Kitty is her private secretary. No, wait," as Mitchell snatched up the telephone book and hastily turned its well-thumbed pages. "She may be with her cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Ben Potter. Here, I'll look up their number for you."

Mitchell hung up the receiver in disgust a minute later. "Central declares no one answers," he explained. "Who shall we try next? Mrs. Parsons,

did you say?" This time he was more successful in getting the number desired, but the reply to his question was unsatisfactory. "The butler declares Miss Baird hasn't been there since yesterday," he told his companion. "Mrs. Parsons is not at home."

McLean's expression had grown serious. "We had better communicate with Charles Craige," he said. "Craige has handled Miss Baird's affairs for years, lawyer, agent, and all that. He may aid us in locating Kitty." Then with a touch of impatience, "Don't stop to look up the number of his law office—it is Main 3300."

As Inspector Mitchell turned again to the telephone, McLean rose and slowly paced back and forth the length of the library. His familiarity with the furnishings and the contents of the bookcases—his taste in literature having coincided with that of Colonel Baird, who spent the last years of his life squandering a depleted fortune to gratify his craving as a collector—caused him to pay little attention to his surroundings, and he walked with head bent, his thoughts with the dead woman upstairs.

Was Inspector Mitchell right—could it have been murder? Who would have reason to harm so feeble an old lady? What motive could have inspired such a senseless crime? Robbery—bah, thieves would not kill to secure books and knickknacks of doubtful value.

But then what motive could have prompted suicide? Why should a woman so near the grave take her own life? Miss Baird had abhorred illness in any form; she had always had a healthy distaste for invalidism, and little patience with neurotic friends.

Miss Susan Baird, of all persons, to be found dead—possibly murdered! McLean took out his handkerchief and passed it over his forehead. For the first time he grew conscious of the closeness of the atmosphere, of the musty smell which dampness sometimes engenders. Instinctively, he stopped in front of a side door which opened on a "stoop" leading to the garden which extended to the back of the house. The door resisted his attempts to open it, and he felt for the key. It was not in the lock.

McLean stared at the door in some surprise. It was the only one in the house fitted with a modern lock, and it had always been Miss Baird's custom to leave the key in the lock. The locks of the other doors were hand-wrought before the Revolution and massive in size. It had been Miss Baird's fad never to have them modernized. One of her few extravagances, if it could be called such, had been to employ a grandson of old "Oscar," their colored factotum, to keep the copper highly burnished and shining with its old-time, slave-day luster. The great fireplaces were lined with copper and Miss Baird was never happier than when able to contem-

plate her grotesque reflection in the walls of the fireplace in her library.

McLean had been a frequent visitor at the Baird mansion, but never before had he seen the key removed from the side door of the library. With a puzzled frown he reached up and pulled back the copper latch which released the upper half of the door—built in the style of the "Dutch" door—and pulled it back. The fresh air, laden as it was with dampness, was refreshing. The rain had slackened, and seeing there was no danger of it splashing inside the library, he pulled the half door still further open. Turning about, he found Inspector Mitchell at his elbow.

"I caught Mr. Craige," he announced. "He is coming right over." Then with a complete change of tone. "How did you open the upper half of this door?"

"By pushing the catch, so—" and McLean demonstrated.

"Hump!" Inspector Mitchell moved the catch back and forth. "I see, there's a knack about it; it baffled me when I tried to open it. I have the key of the lower door," and he drew it out of his pocket.

"Why did you take it out of the lock?"

"Because—" Inspector Mitchell's answer was interrupted by the sudden rush of feet across the outer hall. The portières were thrust aside and

a girl dashed into the library followed by a man.

Utterly oblivious of the inspector's presence, she sped across the room to McLean.

"Oh, Doctor, is it true?" she gasped, incoherently. "Is Aunt Susan—has she—" She faltered and McLean caught her outstretched hands and drew her into a chair.

"Yes," he said, and his quiet, controlled tone brought some measure of relief to the overwrought girl. "Your aunt is dead."

Kitty Baird's head dropped forward and rested on her cupped hands, and tears forced their way through her fingers. At the sound of her weeping, a seven-toed Angora cat stole out from behind a piece of furniture and pattered across the floor. With a flying leap she seated herself in Kitty's lap and brushed her head against the girl's hands. Kitty looked down, caught the soft body in her arms and held the cat tightly to her.

"Mouchette, Mouchette," she moaned. "Aunty's gone—gone," and she buried her face in the long fur. Gradually, her sobs grew less, and McLean, observing that she was regaining some hold on her composure, withdrew to the other end of the library where Inspector Mitchell was holding a low-toned conversation with Charles Craige.

"I am glad you are here, Craige," McLean said,

keeping his voice lowered. "This is the devil of a mess."

The lawyer's handsome face expressed grave concern. "So I judge from what Inspector Mitchell told me on the telephone and what he has just said." He moved so as to catch a better view of the library. "Where have you taken Miss Baird?"

"To her bedroom," replied Mitchell. "The autopsy will be held this afternoon probably."

He had not troubled to lower his rather strident voice and his words reached Kitty's ears. Dropping the cat, she sprang to her feet with a slight cry.

"Autopsy?" she exclaimed. "No, not that!" And she put up her hand as if to ward off a blow.

"Why not?" demanded Mitchell, and as Kitty hesitated, McLean spoke quickly.

"It is customary in cases of sudden death, Kitty, to hold autopsies," he explained. "Your aunt was found dead in this room—"

"Here!" Kitty looked about with a shudder. "I did not realize—Mr. Craige only told me—we met at the door," she pulled herself up short, waited a moment, then continued with more composure. "I understood that aunty had died suddenly. It has been a great shock," she looked piteously from one to the other. "I have lived with aunty ever since I can remember—and now to be without her!" She again paused to steady her voice. "Oh, it seems im-

possible that she is dead; she was so alive—so anxious to live."

Inspector Mitchell cocked an eager eye at McLean.

'So she wanted to live, Miss," he commented. "Never expressed any wish to end her life, did she, Miss Baird?"

"Never!" Kitty stared at him in astonishment. "What put such an idea into your head?"

"It wasn't ever in *my* head," Mitchell retorted. "Dr. McLean is responsible for the theory."

Kitty turned and looked directly at McLean. Tears were still very near the deep blue eyes, and her cheeks had lost their wonted color, but as she faced the three men they were conscious of her beauty. Slightly above medium height, she looked taller owing to her straight and graceful carriage. McLean sighed involuntarily. He dreaded a scene.

"Why, Doctor, what made you think Aunt Susan wished to die?" Kitty's voice rose. "You told me only last week that she was in excellent health."

"So I did." McLean spoke in haste. "Your aunt was in good health, Kitty; but, eh, the circumstances of her death—"

Kitty's eyes widened. "The circumstances of her death," she repeated slowly, and paused as if seeking a word, "were they not—natural?"

"No, Miss Baird, they were not," broke in In-

spector Mitchell, anxious to have the floor. "We found your aunt dead in this library about two hours ago. Dr. McLean examined her body; he can tell you from what she died."

Kitty looked in mute question at McLean while her trembling hands plucked aimlessly at her damp handkerchief. The surgeon impulsively put his arm about her shoulder before speaking.

"Your aunt died from a dose of poison," he stated slowly.

"Poison!" Kitty reeled and but for McLean's strong arm would have fallen. Dumbly, she stared at the three men. "Aunt Susan poisoned! By whom?"

"We do not know that—yet," replied Mitchell, and the tone of his voice chilled Kitty. It was some seconds before she could speak.

"What poisoned her?" she asked.

"The exact nature of the poison will be determined by the autopsy," broke in McLean. "The coroner's examination of the body and mine were superficial, but it did establish the fact that your aunt had swallowed poison." He caught the terror which flashed into Kitty's eyes, and added impulsively, "Miss Baird, in a moment of insanity, may have committed suicide."

"There you go again, Doctor." Mitchell laughed

shortly. "Now, Miss Baird, where did you spend last night?"

"With my cousin, Nina Potter, and her husband, at their apartment in Sixteenth Street," Kitty spoke mechanically. Turning about she walked stiffly over to a chair and sank into it. She wondered if her companions were aware of her trembling knees.

"Kitty," Charles Craige's charmingly modulated voice sounded soothingly to her overwrought nerves. "I would have prepared you for this had I known," he hesitated, "these details. But Inspector Mitchell only telephoned to me that your aunt was dead, and it was not until we both came in that I learned, as you have, of the tragedy. I grieve with you, dear child; your aunt was my good friend for many years."

Kitty looked up at him gratefully. She was very fond of her handsome godfather. "Thank you," she murmured. "I feel stunned." She pressed her fingers against her temples. "Oh, poor aunty—to die here alone! Why, why didn't I get up early and come here at once without waiting for breakfast? I might have saved her."

McLean moved uneasily and exchanged glances with Mitchell.

"Don't reproach yourself, Kitty," he begged. "Your presence here this morning would not have saved your aunt," and as she looked at him in aston-

ishment, he added more slowly, "judging from the condition of the body, your aunt died fully twenty hours ago."

Charles Craig broke the silence. "Twenty hours ago," he repeated. "That would be yesterday—"

"Sunday afternoon, to be exact," stated Inspector Mitchell. "When did you leave here, Miss Baird?"

"Yesterday afternoon, about three o'clock; no, nearly four," Kitty corrected herself with a haste not lost upon the inspector.

"And when did you last see your aunt alive?" he questioned.

"About that time." Kitty's foot tapped restlessly against the rug. "She was in her bedroom, and I called to her as I went down the staircase."

"What did you say to her?" Mitchell was taking mental note of Kitty's well-groomed appearance and her nervous handling of her handkerchief.

"I told her not to sit up late." Kitty did not meet the inspector's eyes. "Aunt Susan seldom went to bed before one or two o'clock in the morning; she claimed it rested her to sit up and read in the library."

"Were the servants here when you left the house?" asked Mitchell.

"Servants?" A ghost of a smile touched Kitty's lips. "Aunty would not employ any one but old Oscar. He never comes until about seven in the morning, and leaves immediately after dinner."

"And was it your custom to leave your aunt alone in the house at night?" Mitchell was blind to the heavy frown with which McLean listened to his continued questioning of Kitty. The surgeon guessed the tension she was under and dreaded a breakdown.

"Occasionally, yes." Observing Mitchell's expression, Kitty added hastily, "Why not? Aunt Susan feared no one."

"And she was murdered." Inspector Mitchell eyed her keenly; then glanced at his companions—both men were watching Kitty.

"Or killed herself—" Kitty spoke with an effort. "How did you learn of my aunt's death?"

Inspector Mitchell seemed not to hear the question and Kitty repeated it more peremptorily.

"We received a telephone message, at Headquarters," he stated finally. "I was in the office at the time and came over to investigate." He paused dramatically. "We found your aunt sitting dead in that chair." He walked over and touched the throne-shaped chair. Kitty did not follow him except with her eyes.

"How did you get in?" asked Craige, walking toward him.

"We found the key of the front door in the lock *on the outside,*" replied Mitchell.

"What!" Kitty sprang to her feet.

"Odd, wasn't it?" Mitchell was watching her closely.

"Very," briefly. Kitty paused in thought. "What was the nature of the message you received over the telephone, Inspector?"

"To come at once to 'Rose Hill,'" Mitchell spoke with impressiveness. "That a crime had been committed."

"Good heavens!" Kitty took a step in his direction, but before she could speak again, Mitchell held up his hand for silence.

"Did I understand, Miss Baird, that you and your aunt occupied this house alone at night?" he asked.

"We did."

"And you left here between three and four o'clock on Sunday—yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes."

"And the last time you saw your aunt she was alive?"

"Yes."

"Do you employ a female servant?"

"No."

Inspector Mitchell regarded the girl in silence. She bore his scrutiny with outward composure.

"Miss Baird," he spoke slowly, weighing his words. "I took the message over the telephone to come at once to 'Rose Hill'—that a crime had been

committed here. The message was given by a woman."

Kitty stared at him uncomprehendingly, dumbly; then, before they could detain her, she fled from the library and rushing upstairs, dashed into her room, locked the door, and flung herself face downward on the bed.

CHAPTER IV

SUICIDE?

THE reception was in full swing and Mrs. Amos Parsons contemplated her crowded drawing room in a spirit of happy self-congratulation. She had just welcomed a newly accredited ambassador and introduced a Cabinet officer to the ambassador's charming wife and she felt that her feet were at last securely placed upon the ladder of success. The scene was typical of the national Capital. The World War had rudely interrupted the "calling" days of the hostesses of Washington, but with the advent of peace a return had been made to old customs, and "teas" were again taking their accepted place in the social calendar.

"A penny for your thoughts," said a masculine voice over her shoulder and glancing around Mrs. Parsons found Charles Craige at her elbow.

"You offer a penny too much," laughed Mrs. Parsons. "They were idle thoughts—"

"About the idle rich." Craig looked at her with

admiration. "Upon my word, Cecilia, you grow prettier every day."

"Happiness is a great 'beautifier,'" Mrs. Parsons glanced up at him with a strange, new shyness; then quickly veiled her eyes that he might not read her thoughts too plainly. Under pretense of arranging the bouquet, his gift, which she was carrying, Craige pressed her hand. His marked attention to the fascinating widow had aroused the interest of their circle of friends, and the prospect of the announcement of their engagement had formed the topic of conversation on numerous occasions.

There was a lull in the arrival of guests and Mrs. Parsons imperceptibly edged toward an alcove. Many curious glances were cast in their direction by both men and women who stood chatting in groups about the long drawing room. They made a striking tableau—Mrs. Parsons' delicate beauty enhanced by a perfectly fitting modish gown, and Charles Craige, standing tall and straight beside her, his iron-grey hair and ruddy complexion adding distinction to his appearance.

"The world and his wife are here this afternoon, Cecilia," he said. "Your tea is an unqualified success. And every one is lingering," glancing down the room. "That is a sure sign that they are enjoying themselves."

"Except Major Wallace." Mrs. Parsons drew

his attention to a man worming his way between the groups of people. "He appears to avoid his friends—there, he has cut Nina Potter dead."

"What a caddish thing to do!" Craige spoke with warmth as he saw Mrs. Potter shrink back and her half-extended hand drop to her side. Turning quickly, she slipped behind two women and disappeared from their sight. Walking moodily ahead, Leigh Wallace found himself face to face with his hostess and Charles Craige.

"Not leaving so early, surely?" she exclaimed as he put out his hand.

"Yes, I just dropped in for a minute," Wallace explained, and he made no effort to conceal the indifference of his tone. "I don't feel very fit this afternoon, so you must excuse me. Good evening, Craige," and he turned abruptly and left them.

"Of all uncivil people!" observed Mrs. Parsons, much incensed. "That's the last invitation he gets to my house."

"He doesn't look well," Craige remarked thoughtfully. "I presume he and Kitty Baird have had another quarrel."

"Well, he has no right to vent his ill-humor on me or my guests." Mrs. Parsons was not pacified.

"I hope Kitty decides to marry Ted Rogers and not Leigh Wallace." Craige looked grave. "It

would be a far more suitable match, although I understand Rodgers is not wealthy."

"Mr. Rodgers was here a moment ago." Mrs. Parsons raised her lorgnette and glanced about her. "He asked particularly for Kitty. Where in the world is she? She was to pour tea for me this afternoon."

"Have you not heard—"

"Heard?" Attracted by the alteration in Craige's voice, Mrs. Parsons looked at him. "Heard what?"

"That Kitty's aunt, Miss Susan Baird, was found dead this morning—"

"Great heavens!" Mrs. Parsons retreated a step in shocked surprise. "Oh, Mrs. Sutherland, so glad to see you. You know Mr. Craige, of course." As the newcomer and the lawyer exchanged greetings, Mrs. Parsons saw Nina Potter and started toward her, but several guests claimed her attention and when she looked around Nina had vanished.

The room which served Benjamin Potter as a combination workshop and library was at the other end of the apartment which the elderly naturalist had leased upon his marriage to Nina Underwood six months before. The apartment house, one of those erected to meet the demands for housing wealthy war-workers who thronged the national Capital during the winter of 1917-1918, had but one apartment to each floor, and Potter had been grati-

fied by having the best room, from his point of view, set aside for his exclusive use by his bride.

Mrs. Potter had also seen to it that the furniture was of the finest mahogany, the filing and specimen cases of the most approved models, while the leather-seated chairs and lounges added greatly to the comfort of the occupants of the room. No expense had been spared and for the first time in his hard-working, studious life, Ben Potter had found himself surrounded with every comfort which money could purchase.

Potter's marriage to his pretty stenographer had been a severe shock to several impecunious relatives and a nine days' wonder to his small world. He had taken the surprised comments and sometimes belated congratulations of both relatives and friends with the same placid good nature which characterized all his actions. Nina, with a tact for which she had not been credited, went out of her way to cultivate his friends, and if she felt the chilly reception accorded her, never by word or manner betrayed the fact.

Seated alone in his room and absorbed in his book, Potter was oblivious of the lengthening shadows and was only recalled to his surroundings by the opening of the door.

"Well, what is it?" he asked testily. "Oh!" At

sight of his wife, his expression brightened. "I did not expect you home so soon."

"Soon?" Nina laughed softly, as she brushed his unruly gray hair back from his forehead. "Have you no idea of the time? It is nearly six o'clock, and you should not be reading with only one light turned on. Doctor McLean must talk to you."

Potter made a wry face. "I would rather listen to you than any doctor," he said and pulled forward a chair close to his own. "Tell me, have you had a pleasant time at Mrs. Parsons' tea?"

"Does one ever have a pleasant time at a tea?" Nina's gesture was eloquent. "Where are your matches, dear?"—fumbling, as she spoke, with her cigarette case.

Potter frowned slightly as he located a match box under the tumbled papers on his desk and struck a light for her. He had never been able to master his dislike to women smoking, in spite of his staunch belief that his pretty wife was always right in everything she did. Reading his expression like a book, Nina slipped her hand inside his and leaned against his arm.

"It is very lonely going about without you," she murmured. "I don't enjoy myself a bit when you remain at home."

Potter turned and kissed the soft cheek so near his own. "My holiday is over," he answered, and

putting out his foot touched a packing case, its contents partly spread on the floor in an untidy pile. "I cannot neglect my work."

"You will never be accused of that," with flattering emphasis. "But, dear, I need—want your society more than these dreadful reptiles," and she made a slight grimace as she glanced at the bottles containing specimens preserved in alcohol which adorned the shelves of a cabinet near at hand. "I know," lowering her voice, "I'm selfish—"

"I love your selfishness, dear," he replied, and held her closely to him just as a tap sounded on the door. "Confound it! Come in."

The Japanese servant, who answered his command, bowed profoundly, and his calm gaze never flickered at sight of the loverlike attitude of husband and wife.

"You home, Sir?" he asked.

"Yes, of course, I'm home. What of it?" Potter dropped his arm from about his wife's waist in embarrassment.

"Mr. Rodgers call upon you." The Japanese spoke without haste. "You see him?"

"Certainly. Bring him here," and at the words Moto vanished.

"Here?" echoed Nina. "Isn't it a bit untidy?"

"What of it? He hasn't come to see us," he grumbled. "Probably thinks Kitty is here. I don't

approve of Kitty playing fast and loose with those two men."

"What men?" Nina was not looking at her husband, and missed his keen scrutiny.

"Ted Rodgers and Leigh Wallace," briefly. "If it goes on much longer, I will speak to Cousin Susan Baird. Hello, what did you do that for?" as the room was suddenly plunged in darkness. A second later the light flashed up.

"I pulled the wrong string," Nina explained as she lighted both sides of the electric lamp.

Potter paused undecidedly, then rose and, going over to the packing case, tossed excelsior and paper back into it and pushed it behind a screen. When he turned back, he saw Nina deftly rearranging the ornaments and papers on his flat top desk. In silence he watched her graceful movements and the play of the lamplight on her hair which shone like spun gold under its rays. It would have taken a more observant man than her husband to have discovered that nature's art had been supplemented by the rouge pot. No wrinkles marred the soft pink and white tint of her complexion, and few would have guessed that she had passed her thirtieth birthday.

Looking up, Nina caught her husband's gaze and flushed faintly.

"I hope Mr. Rodgers won't stay long," she began,

and checked herself hastily as Moto ushered in their caller. "So very glad to see you, Mr. Rodgers," she exclaimed, extending her hand, which rested in his for a fraction of a second and was withdrawn.

At the touch of her cold fingers, Rodgers looked intently at her. He still found it hard to realize that the fashionably gowned woman before him was Ben Potter's wife. Ben a Benedict! The mere idea had provoked a smile, and the announcement of the marriage in cold print had produced a burst of merriment, and the silent hope that Ben had found a motherly soul to run his house for him. Intsead of which, with the perversity of Fate, Ben Potter had selected a wife at least fifteen years his junior, who would most certainly enjoy the social life of Washington to the full.

Potter had formed a strong attachment for the younger man when spending a winter in San Francisco three years before and Rodgers had been a frequent visitor since his arrival in Washington. His visits, as Potter shrewdly noted, were generally timed to find Kitty Baird with her cousins, and ended in his escorting her home.

"I missed you both at Mrs. Parsons' tea, so dropped in for a chat," Rodgers remarked, accepting a cigar from Potter as Nina perched herself on one end of the lounge. "Why weren't you there?"

"Nina went," answered Potter, throwing himself

down in his favorite chair. "You don't catch me at a tea."

"You were there, Mrs. Potter?" Rodgers spoke in surprise. "I searched for you—"

"It was a frightful jam." Nina picked up her workbag which she had left on the lounge earlier in the afternoon and unfolded its contents. "I did not stay long."

"But you heard the news?"

"News?" Potter glanced up, expectantly. The tone in which the question was put arrested his attention which had strayed to his wife. "Was there any special news? Nina, you didn't tell me."

"I heard no news in particular." Nina held a needle and thread nearer the light. "To what do you refer, Mr. Rodgers?"

"To the death of Miss Susan Baird."

Potter sat bolt upright. His healthy color changed to a sickly white. "Cousin Susan dead? Impossible!"

"It is a fact. Mr. Craige told me—" Rodgers stooped over and picked up the needle which had slipped from Nina's clutch. "Take care you don't prick yourself, Mrs. Potter, he warned, as he placed it in the palm of her hand and noticed the quick, spasmodic movement of her fingers. "The news had just gotten about and every one at the tea was talking of Miss Baird."

"That's turning the tables; usually Cousin Susan talked about everybody," Potter remarked, breaking a slight pause. "Why hasn't Kitty telephoned us? I am now her nearest living relative."

"She may have tried to reach us," suggested his wife. "I don't suppose Moto answered the telephone in my absence; he hates it. Did you hear it ring, Ben?"

"No," shortly. "I can't say I grieve over your news, Ted. I have always resented Cousin Susan's treatment of Kitty. Made the girl slave for her, the venomous old scandal-monger."

"Ben!" Nina's shocked tone caused her husband to pause in his rapid speech. "Did you hear, Mr. Rodgers, the cause of Cousin Susan's death?"

"Bit her tongue and died from blood-poisoning," growled Potter, before Rodgers could answer.

"Ben!"

"Well, all right, dear; I'll say no more. But," in self-defense, noting Rodgers' surprise, "I've had no cause to love Cousin Susan— I heard her caustic remarks about my marriage. Never mind that now," with a quick glance at his wife. "Go ahead, Ted, tell us of what Cousin Susan died."

"The coroner will have to answer that question, Ben."

"The coroner!" Potter rose to his feet and stared at his guest. "What d'ye mean? Oh, hurry your

speech, man; don't keep us in suspense," as Rodgers hesitated and eyed Mrs. Potter in some trepidation. Judging from her sudden loss of color, she was about to faint.

"Your cousin was found dead," he said, and got no further.

"Found dead—where?" demanded Mrs. Potter, breathlessly.

"In her library."

Potter broke the pause. "Go ahead and tell us what you know, Ted." He reseated himself. "Give us every detail."

Rodgers shook his head. "I know very little on the subject," he said. "I stopped on the way here and telephoned to 'Rose Hill,' but could get no response; so I came right here supposing you could tell me further news. I thought Miss Kitty might be with you."

"We have not seen Kitty since early this morning," answered Nina. "Who found Cousin Susan?" Rodgers, his ear trained to detect variations in the human voice, observed a faint huskiness in the usual soft tones.

"I do not know, Mrs. Potter," he said. "Miss Baird was so well known in Washington that her death was commented on at the tea, and I only heard a garbled account of what occurred. Perhaps there might be something in the evening paper."

"To be sure." Potter jumped at the suggestion, and hurrying toward the door, pushed an electric bell. A second later and Moto responded. "The evening paper, quick."

Moto let his gaze travel around the room, then darting forward he crossed to where the packing case stood partially concealed behind the screen. Delving into its contents, he returned a moment later with a crumpled newpaper and extended it to his master.

"You toss it down, so," demonstrating, "when I bring it to you, sir," he explained. "You say, 'Moto, don't trouble me, go away,' and I go."

"Well, well, Moto, you interrupted me." Potter's tone was apologetic. "Much obliged for finding the paper. That is all I wanted." And Moto slipped away to his pantry in time to hear the buzzer of the front door bell sounding faintly.

Forgetful of all but the paper in his hand, Potter turned it over and searched for the item of news.

"Try the first page," suggested Rodgers. Potter switched the sheet around and gave vent to a startled exclamation as his eyes fell on the double column heading:

ELDERLY SPINSTER FOUND DEAD
SUICIDE SUSPECTED

"Suicide!" Potter gasped. "Bless my soul! Who would have believed Cousin Susan would kill herself?"

"She didn't!" The denial rang out clearly from the direction of the door and wheeling around the three occupants of the room saw Kitty Baird confronting them. "Aunt Susan did not commit suicide, Ben; you know she didn't."

Potter stared at her long and earnestly. Twice he opened his mouth to speak and closed it again, after a look at Ted Rodgers who, upon Kitty's entrance, had stopped somewhat in the background so that his face was in shadow.

"I don't know anything," Potter said finally. "I haven't read the paper—"

"The paper has printed lies!" Kitty's foot came down with an unmistakable stamp, and her eyes sparkled with wrath. "I tell you Aunt Susan did not commit suicide."

"Yes, dear." Nina stepped hastily forward and threw her arm protectingly across Kitty's shoulder. "Come and sit down, and when you are more composed you can tell us of—of the details." Exerting some strength, she pulled the unwilling girl to the lounge and gently pushed her down upon it. "I am so, so sorry, Kitty. Your aunt—" she stumbled a bit in her speech— "Your aunt's death is a great shock—"

"To me," bitterly. "I know many people disliked her. Poor Aunt Susan—" Kitty's lips trembled. "You need not try to dissemble your feelings, Ben. I know you hated Susan."

"Oh, come, Kitty; that's pretty strong language!" Potter flushed angrily. "You are unstrung—where are your smelling salts, Nina?"

"A glass of wine would be better." Rodgers spoke for the first time, and Kitty looked up in startled surprise. She had been conscious of a third person in the room when she first entered, but, absorbed in her talk with her cousin, had forgotten his presence.

"Where's my flask?" demanded Potter, considerably shaken out of his habitual calm. "Oh, thank you, my dear," as Nina snatched it out of one of his desk drawers. "Now, Kitty," unscrewing the stopper and pouring some cognac into an empty tumbler, which, with a water carafe, stood on his desk. "Drink this; no, I insist—" as she put up her hand in protest. "You will need all your strength—drink every drop."

Kitty's eyes sought Rodgers and his quick "Please do" did more to make her drink the cognac than all Potter's urging. The fiery strength of the old brandy made her catch her breath, but she did not put the tumbler down until she had swallowed its contents. As the stimulant crept through her

veins, her head cleared, and the feeling of deadly faintness which had threatened to overcome her several times on her way to her cousin's apartment, disappeared.

"I will tell you what I know," she began. "Aunt Susan was found by the police dead in our library. The coroner claims that she had taken poison."

"Well?" prompted Potter. "Go on."

"Aunt Susan never swallowed poison—of her own free will." Kitty turned and gazed at Ted Rodgers. Intently she studied his face, noting his clear-cut features and shapely head. Standing six feet four, he seemed to dwarf Ben Potter. Although the latter was nearly his equal in height, the stoop in his shoulders, which betrayed the hours spent in pouring over books, made Potter appear much shorter. Something of his quiet, determined character showed in Rodgers' firm mouth and handsome eyes, eyes which redeemed the severe lines of his face.

He had fallen madly in love with Kitty and had courted her with the persistency of his faithful nature. Heartsick, craving sympathy, which had brought her to her cousin only to be rebuffed by his reception of the news of her aunt's death, Kitty turned instinctively to Rodgers.

"Won't you help me prove that Aunt Susan did not commit suicide?" she asked.

As he studied the upturned face, the deep blue

eyes, made more brilliant by the tears she had shed that morning, and noted the forlorn droop of her shoulders, Rodgers' decision was taken.

"I will do anything for you—anything," he promised, his deep voice vibrating with feeling.

"Then find the murderer of Aunt Susan," she cried.

"How—what?" Potter looked at her aghast. "What makes *you* think Cousin Susan was murdered?"

"My intuition," promptly. "Oh, you may jeer, but it was no case of suicide. Aunt Susan did not court death—she feared it."

CHAPTER V

AT THE MORGUE

CORONER PENFIELD adjusted his glasses and gazed at the six men who composed the jury, as they filed into their places, and then turned to look at the spectators assembled in the room reserved for the coroner's inquests at the District of Columbia Morgue. Not only Washington society was taking a deep interest in the inquiry into the death of Miss Susan Baird, but many other citizens of the national Capital, to whom the name of Baird meant nothing, and who had been unacquainted with the spinster in her life-time. Every seat was taken in the large square room, and from his position on the elevated platform, where stood tables and chairs for the coroner, his assistant, the reporters, and the witnesses, Coroner Penfield saw Dr. Leonard McLean conversing with Inspector Mitchell of the Central Office.

The hands of the wall clock were within five minutes of ten, the hour at which the inquest had been

called, on Tuesday morning, when the outer door opened and Ted Rodgers stepped inside the room, followed a second later by Benjamin Potter. Observing two unoccupied seats on the second row they crossed the room, exchanging, as they did so, low-spoken greetings with friends and acquaintances who had come early to secure the most advantageous seats.

The swearing in of the jury by the Morgue Master required but a short time. Clearing his throat, Coroner Penfield outlined the reason for the inquest, and asked the jury if they had inspected the body of the dead woman.

"We have," responded the foreman, and Penfield turned to the Morgue Master, who occupied a chair at the foot of the platform.

"Call the first witness," he directed. "Inspector Mitchell."

Hat in hand, the Inspector advanced to the steps and mounted to the witness chair, and was duly sworn by the Morgue Master. In businesslike tones he answered the coroner's quickly put questions as to his identity and length of service on the Metropolitan Police Force and Detective Bureau.

"Did you find Miss Baird's body?" asked the coroner.

"I did, Sir."

"When?"

"Yesterday, Monday morning, when summoned to her home in Georgetown."

"How did the summons reach you?"

"By telephone." Mitchell hesitated, and the coroner waited for him to continue before putting another question. "The message was to go at once to 'Rose Hill,' that a crime had been committed there."

"Did the person talking on the telephone give his name?"

"No, Sir."

"Did you ask his name?"

"I did, but she rang off instead of answering."

"She?" inquiringly.

"I took the voice to be that of a woman," explained Mitchell cautiously.

"Are you not certain that it was a woman speaking?"

"To the best of my belief it was." Mitchel paused. "I am sure it was a woman's voice."

"Have you tried to trace the call?"

"Yes," somewhat glumly. "But Central had no record of it."

"Then it did not come over a public telephone?"

"No, Sir."

"Was it on a limited service wire?"

"No. Central declares not," responded Mitchell. "She insists that it must have been sent by some one using unlimited service."

Penfield paused to jot down a note on his memorandum pad before again questioning the inspector.

"At what hour did the telephone call reach you?"

"At eight minutes past eight o'clock yesterday morning. I was in Police Headquarters and took the message myself," tersely.

"At what hour did you reach Miss Baird's home?"

"Fifteen minutes later. I took O'Bryan, a plain clothes man, and Patrolman Myers with me."

"Tell us what you found when you reached the Baird house," Coroner Penfield directed, settling back in his chair. Conscious that he had the undivided attention of every one in the crowded room, Mitchell spoke with slow impressiveness.

"We went up the front steps of the house and rang the bell; not getting any response we rang several times. I was just thinking that we had better try the back entrance when O'Bryan saw the key in the front door—"

"Wait." Penfield held up his hand. "Do I understand that the key to the front door was left in the lock on the *outside* in plain view of every passerby?"

"It wasn't exactly in plain view," protested Mitchell. "We didn't see it at once, and the sidewalk is some distance from the house, which stands on a

high terrace. Passers-by could not see the key in the lock unless they ran up the steps and stood in the vestibule of the front door." .

"Was the door locked?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Was it a spring lock?"

"No, Sir." Mitchell drew an old-fashioned brass key from his pocket and handed it to the coroner. "That lock, Sir, was made by hand many years ago. It's the kind that if you lock the door, either from the inside or the outside, the door could not be opened unless you had the key to unlock it."

"Then, Inspector, some person, on leaving the Baird house, locked the door on the outside, and thereby locked in any person or persons who might have been in the house at that time?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Ump!" Penfield picked up the brass key and handed it to the foreman of the jury. "Did you find finger marks on the key?" he asked.

"No, not one." Mitchell hesitated. "Whoever handled the key wore gloves."

"Very likely." Penfield spoke more briskly. "What did you discover inside the house, Inspector?"

"We found no one in the hall; so we walked into the parlor which is on the right of the front door. No one was there, so we kept on through the door opening into the rear hall, and from there walked

into the library." Mitchell paused dramatically. "There we found Miss Baird's dead body lying huddled up in a big chair in front of her tea table."

"Had she been taking tea?"

"Yes, judging from the plate of sandwiches and cakes, and her nearly empty teacup." Mitchell explained in detail. "There was a plate in front of her on which lay a half-eaten peach."

"Was there evidence to show that some one had been having tea with Miss Baird?" inquired Penfield.

"Only one cup and saucer and plate had been used, Sir."

"And the chairs, how were they placed?"

"About as usual, I imagine." Mitchell looked a trifle worried. "There was no chair drawn up to the tea table, if you mean that. Only Miss Baird's chair stood close by it."

"What did you do upon the discovery of Miss Baird's body?" asked Penfield, after a pause.

"Made sure that she was dead and not in need of a physician, then sent O'Bryan to telephone to the coroner, while Myers and I searched the house," replied Mitchell.

"Did you find any one in the house?"

"No, Sir. It was empty, except for the dead woman and a cat."

The inspector's reply caused a stir of interest,

and one juror started to address him, then, conscious of attracting attention, decided not to speak.

"Did you find the windows and doors locked?" inquired Penfield, after a second's thought.

"Yes; that is, those on the first floor and in the basement were locked," explained Mitchell. "The windows on the second and third floors were unlocked, but closed. Sunday was a cold day," he added.

"In your opinion, Mitchell, could the house have been entered from the second story?" asked Penfield.

The inspector considered the question before answering. "No, Sir, not without a ladder, and we found none on the premises. The house sets back in its own grounds, so to speak, and the neighboring houses are quite far away. There is no party wall, and no porch roof to aid a housebreaker."

"That is all for the present, Inspector. As you go out, ask O'Bryan to come here."

The plain clothes officer kept them waiting only a brief second. His testimony simply corroborated that of his superior officer, and Patrolman Myers, who followed him, added nothing of interest. Upon his departure from the platform, his place was taken by an old negro, who, with some difficulty, mounted the steps and hobbled across the platform to the witness chair.

"What is your name?" asked Coroner Penfield, who had waited in some impatience while the witness was being sworn.

"Oskah, Sah, please, Sah."

"Oscar what?"

"Oscar Benjamin De Cassenove Jackson, Sah."

"Well, Oscar, are you acquainted with the nature of an oath?"

"Laws, Sah, ain't I been married mos' forty years? My wife, she's kinda handy wif her tongue," and Oscar smiled, deprecatingly.

"I am not alluding to swearing," exclaimed Penfield. "I mean the sort of oath requiring you to tell the truth and nothing but the truth."

"Laws, Sah, I tells de truf every day o' my life," replied Oscar with some indignation. "'Tain't no occasion to tell me that."

"Very well." Penfield spoke with sternness. "Remember, you are under oath to tell only the truth. When did you last see Miss Susan Baird alive?"

Oscar blinked at the abruptness of the question. "Sunday mawning, Sah, when I was servin' dinner at one o'clock."

"Did she appear to be in good spirits?" asked Penfield. "In good health—" he added, noting Oscar's mystified expression.

"Yessah. She ate real hearty, and when I went in de lib'ry after dinner, she was jes' as peaceful an'

ca'm, a-sittin' in that great easy chair o' her's as if she never had had no words with Miss Kitty."

"Oh, so Miss Baird had words with Miss Kitty—and who might Miss Kitty be?"

A startled look flitted across Ted Rodgers' face, to be gone the next instant. He had followed the testimony of each witness with undivided attention, answering only in monosyllables the muttered remarks made to him occasionally by Ben Potter, whose expression of boredom had given place to more lively interest at sight of Oscar on his way to the witness chair.

"Who am Miss Kitty?" asked Oscar in scandalized surprise. "Why, Miss Baird's niece. They live together, leastwise they did 'till yesterday. Poor ole Miss, she didn't mean no harm—"

"No harm to whom?" questioned Penfield swiftly.

"To Miss Kitty. She jes' said she wouldn't have no such carrying-on," explained Oscar.

"To what did she refer?"

Oscar favored the coroner with a blank stare. "I dunno, Sah. That's all o' de conversation that I overheard."

Penfield regarded him attentively, but the old man's gaze did not waver, and after a moment he resumed his examination.

"How long have you worked for Miss Baird?"

" 'Most twenty years, Sah."

"And what did you do for her?"

"I cooked, waited on de table, tended the fires and the garden, cleaned de house, an' run errands," ended Oscar with a flourish, and Penfield had difficulty in suppressing a smile. Oscar's rheumatic legs did not suggest an agile errand boy.

"Who were the other servants?"

"Weren't none," tersely. "Miss Baird, she wouldn't keep no yeller help, so Mandy, my wife, washed de clothes, an' I done de rest."

"Did you and Mandy sleep in Miss Baird's house?"

"No, Sah. We lives in our own house, two blocks away."

"What were your working hours?"

"Hey?" Oscar stroked his wooly head reflectively. "'Most all day," he volunteered finally. "Mandy had one o' her spells yesterday mawnin' an' I had ter get a doctah fo' her, an' that's why I never reached Miss Baird's 'til 'bout noon."

"I see." Penfield sat back in his chair and fumbled with his watch charm. Oscar as a witness was a disappointment, whatever his accomplishments as an all-round servant. "At what hour did you leave Miss Baird's on Sunday?"

"'Bout half-past two," answered Oscar, after due thought.

"And whom did you leave in the house?"

"Miss Baird and her niece, Miss Kitty."

"No one else—no visitor?"

"No, Sah."

"Think again, Oscar. Remember, you are under oath. Did either Miss Baird or Miss Kitty Baird have callers before you left on Sunday afternoon?"

"No, Sah, they did not, not while I was there."

Penfield pushed back his chair and rose. "That will do, Oscar, you are excused. Hume," to the Morgue Master. "Call Miss Katrina Baird."

CHAPTER VI

TESTIMONY

THERE was craning of necks and bending of heads as the Morgue Master opened the door leading to the room where the witnesses waited to be called, and every eye was focussed on Kitty Baird as she stepped into the court room.

"Don't look so startled, Kitty," whispered Dr. Leonard McLean in her ear. He had retained his seat by the door, expecting to leave at any moment. "This inquest is only a legal formality."

"But these people—the publicity," she faltered.

"Move on, Miss, move on," directed Hume, the Morgue Master. "You can't talk to the witnesses, Doctor. This way, Miss," and interposing his thick-set, stocky figure between Leonard and Kitty, he followed her to the platform and administered the oath: "To tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

Kitty sat down in the witness chair with a feeling

of thankfulness. The space between it and the door through which she had entered had seemed an endless distance as she traversed it. Coroner Penfield swung his chair around so as to obtain a better view of her.

"Your full name?" he asked.

"Katrina Baird." Her low voice barely reached the jurors, and Penfield smiled at her encouragingly.

"Please speak louder," he suggested. "Were you related to Miss Susan Baird?"

"Yes; she was my aunt," Kitty's voice gained in strength as her confidence returned. "My father, Judge George Baird, was her only brother."

"You made your home in Georgetown with your aunt?"

"Yes, ever since the death of my parents."

"And who else resided with your aunt?"

"No one."

"No servants?"

"No. Our only servant, Oscar, never slept in the house."

"Did your aunt ever employ another servant?"

"No."

"No chambermaid?"

"No." Kitty's flush was becoming to her, the coroner decided. The added color brought out the blue of her eyes and softened the haggard lines which had come overnight. "My aunt could not af-

ford to employ two servants, so we looked after the house, Oscar doing the heavy work. He was always faithful and kind."

"And devoted to your aunt?" with a quick look at her.

"Yes, certainly," she responded, calmly.

There was a brief pause before Penfield again addressed her, and Kitty, her first nervous dread of facing the crowded court room a thing of the past, allowed her gaze to wander about the room. It was with a sharp stab of pain that she recognized more than one familiar face among the spectators. Could it be that men and women whom her aunt had counted among her friends and whom she had entertained in her limited way had come to the inquest from curiosity? Kitty shivered, the idea shocked her.

"Did you spend last Sunday at home, Miss Baird?" asked Penfield.

"No, not the entire day," she replied. "I left there about three o'clock in the afternoon to go to my cousin, Mrs. Benjamin Potter, at whose apartment I was to spend the night."

"Was it your custom to leave your aunt alone in the house at night?"

"Not a custom, certainly; but I did occasionally stay overnight with friends or with my cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Potter, in Washington," Kitty explained.

"Aunt Susan was never afraid of being left alone in the house. And, of course, I was at my work all through the day."

"And what is your work, Miss Baird?"

"I am employed as a social secretary by Mrs. Amos Parsons," she replied, concisely. "I am with her from nine in the morning until four in the afternoon."

"Only on week days?"

"Yes. I have Sunday to myself."

"And how did you spend last Sunday, Miss Baird?"

"I went to church in the morning."

"Alone?"

"No. Major Leigh Wallace accompanied me."

"Did Major Wallace return to your house with you?"

"No."

The curtly spoken monosyllable brought a sharp glance from the coroner, of which she appeared unaware.

"At what hour did you reach your house, Miss Baird?" he asked.

"After church—" she considered a moment. "To be exact, about a quarter of one."

"Did you and your aunt lunch alone?"

"Yes. We had no guests," briefly.

"And what did you do after luncheon?"

"It wasn't luncheon, it was dinner," she explained. "I went upstairs almost immediately after it was served, and changed my dress preparatory to going out."

"When did you last see your aunt alive?" asked Penfield.

"As I was leaving the house," Kitty spoke more hurriedly, "I looked into her bedroom and called out 'Good-by!' "

"Miss Baird," Penfield let his eyeglasses dangle from their ribbon and stood up. "Was your aunt expecting guests at tea on Sunday afternoon?"

"I am sure she was not," she replied. "Aunt Susan always asked me to arrange the tea table if she had invited any of her friends to come and see her. She was, eh, formal and insisted that her guests be given tea when they called."

"Was it your aunt's custom to drink tea every afternoon whether she had guests or not?"

"Oh, yes. She had a spirit lamp and a tea caddy in the library, and made tea for herself," Kitty responded. "But if any friends were coming she insisted always that the table be especially arranged—sandwiches—and all that," a trifle vaguely. Kitty was growing tired of answering questions which appeared to lead nowhere.

Coroner Penfield picked up several sheets of pa-

per and thumbed them over until he came to a penciled memorandum.

"There were two sandwiches and some peaches on the tea table in front of your aunt," he remarked. "Who prepared those sandwiches?"

For the second time Kitty colored hotly. "The sandwiches were left over from some I made on Saturday when Aunt Susan entertained Mrs. Amos Parsons at tea.

"And the peaches—" questioned Penfield.

"I don't know where Aunt Susan got the peaches," she said, with a quick shrug of her shoulders. "Probably Oscar brought them to her on Sunday morning when I was out. He knew her fondness for them."

"Did you not always know what supplies you had in your larder?"

"Why, no." With a lift of her eyebrows. "Oscar did the marketing."

Penfield laid down the papers in his hand. "Was your aunt in her normal health on Sunday?" he asked.

"Apparently so; I never observed any change in her."

"Had she complained of illness recently?"

"No. On the contrary, she seemed brighter and more cheerful during the past ten days," Kitty answered.

"Was she ever despondent:"

"No," promptly. "She always looked on the bright side of things. I—" with a fleeting smile—"I was the pessimist of the family."

"I see." Coroner Penfield regarded her thoughtfully. She looked barely out of her 'teens,' and hers was certainly not the face of a pessimist—youth, good health, and good looks did not conspire to a gloomy outlook on life. "Who were your aunt's intimate friends?"

"Do you mean women of her own age?"

"Yes; of her age, and also of yours."

Kitty debated the question thoughtfully before answering it. "Not many of Aunt Susan's old friends are alive," she said. "Aunty had just passed her seventieth birthday. She liked all my friends."

"All?"

"Yes." Kitty regarded him steadfastly. She had noted the emphasis on the word "all." A moment passed before the coroner addressed her again.

"Miss Baird, have you unlimited telephone service?"

"Why, yes." Kitty's tone expressed surprise. "We have always had unlimited service."

Penfield paused and wrote a few lines on his memorandum pad. When he spoke, his voice had gained an added seriousness.

"Were you and your aunt always on the best of terms?" he asked.

Kitty sat erect and her hands dropped on the arms of her chair.

"Your question is impertinent," she said cuttingly, and, in spite of himself, Penfield flushed.

"I insist upon an answer," he retorted. "A truthful answer."

"Dr. Penfield!" Kitty rose.

"Be seated, Madam. A witness cannot leave until dismissed by the coroner." Penfield spoke with unwonted severity. "I will change my question. What did you and Miss Baird quarrel about on Sunday?"

"Quarrel?"

"Yes, Madam, quarrel. Your servant, Oscar, overheard you."

Kitty's bright color had flown. With eyes expressing her scorn, she threw back her head defiantly.

"Ask Oscar," she suggested. "Servants' gossip may prove diverting—whether truthful or not."

Penfield watched her for an intolerable moment. Kitty's breath was coming unevenly when he finally spoke.

"You are excused, Miss Baird," he stated briefly, and turned to the Morgue Master. "Summon Mrs. Benjamin Potter, Hume," he directed.

Kitty's sudden dismissal by the coroner was a shock to the reporters as well as to the spectators, and they watched her leave the room with undisguised curiosity and disappointment. Were they to be cheated out of a sensational scene? Why had not Coroner Penfield pressed home his question?

Nina Potter's entrance cut short speculation and the reporters watched her take her place in the witness chair with renewed hope. Her self-possessed air was a surprise to Ted Rodgers, who secretly considered her a bundle of nerves. She looked extremely pretty and Coroner Penfield watched her admiringly as the oath was being administered. From his seat on the second row, Ben Potter leaned against Rodgers, regardless of the latter's discomfort, in his endeavor to get an uninterrupted view of his wife.

"Mrs. Potter," Coroner Penfield had again resumed his seat. "What relation are you to Miss Katrina Baird?"

"No relation, except by marriage." Her voice, though low, held a carrying quality, and reached the ears of all in the room. "My husband is her second cousin."

"Have you known her long?"

"Since my marriage to her cousin, six months ago," briefly.

"Did you know her aunt, Miss Susan Baird?"

"Oh, yes, very well. We frequently took Sunday dinner with them."

"Did you ever hear Miss Susan Baird express a dislike for any particular person?"

Nina shook her head, while a faint smile drew down the corners of her pretty mouth. "Miss Susan disliked a great many people," she said. "Me, among them. In fact, I never heard her make a complimentary remark about any one."

Penfield looked taken aback. "Miss Baird was eccentric, was she not?"

"Yes, not to say odd."

"Exactly what do you mean?"

Nina raised her eyebrows and pursed up her mouth before answering.

"If Miss Baird was calling upon friends and liked the tea cakes, she would open her bag and pour the cakes into it," she explained. "If she was shopping downtown and grew weary, she would look about and if she saw a motor car belonging to any of her friends waiting at the curb, she would inform the chauffeur he was to take her home. And—" Mrs. Potter's smile was most engaging, "Miss Baird always got her own way."

"Until her death—" dryly. "It looked as if some one balked her there."

"Yes—and who was that some one?" questioned Mrs. Potter sweetly.

Coroner Penfield concealed his annoyance under a pretense of hunting for a pencil among the papers on his table. While listening intently to the dialogue between Penfield and Mrs. Potter, Ted Rodgers had grown aware that Ben Potter was gnawing his nails. Rodgers loathed small noises. He was about to remonstrate when Potter leaned back and whispered in his ear:

"I always told you Nina was clever; bless her heart!"

Rodgers attempted no reply as he waited for Coroner Penfields' next question.

"Did Miss Kitty Baird spend Sunday night at your apartment, Mrs. Potter?" asked Penfield.

"She did," with quiet emphasis. "She came in time to help me serve tea in my husband's studio, stayed to dinner, and retired early. We had breakfast at nine o'clock, after which she returned to Georgetown."

"That is all, Mrs. Potter, thank you," and Penfield assisted her down the steps, then turned aside to speak to Hume. "Recall Oscar Jackson," he said.

Mrs. Potter had almost reached the door when it opened to admit Major Leigh Wallace. He failed to see her in his hurry to secure a seat vacated by an elderly woman who was just leaving and brushed by without greeting. Nina's pretty color had van-

ished when she reached her motor parked near the Morgue. She did not start the engine, however, upon entering the car but sat waiting with untiring patience for the inquest to adjourn.

Nina's exit from the court room had been closely watched by two pairs of eyes. When Rodgers turned to speak to Potter, he found him sitting well back in his chair, and his whole attention centered on Major Leigh Wallace. The latter, entirely oblivious of the identity of the men and women about him, sat regarding the coroner and the jury while his restless fingers rolled a swagger stick held upright between the palms of his hands.

Coroner Penfield hardly allowed the old negro servant time to take his seat again in the witness chair, before addressing him.

"What were Miss Baird and her niece, Miss Kitty, quarreling about on Sunday?" he asked.

"W-w-what yo' ax?" Oscar's breath, such as he had left after his exertions in reaching the platform, deserted him, and he stared in dumb surprise at the coroner.

"You have testified that you overheard Miss Baird and her niece quarreling," Penfield spoke slowly and with emphasis. "What were they quarreling about? Come," as the old man remained silent. "We are awaiting your answer."

"Yessir." Oscar ducked his head, and the whites

of his eyes showed plainly as he rolled them in fright, first toward the jury and then toward the coroner. "Yessir, 'twarn't much of a fuss; leastways, it might o' been wuss, but Miss Kitty, she done jes' walk upstairs."

"What was it about?" insisted Penfield.

"Well 'er," Oscar fingered his worn cap nervously. "Miss Susan, she didn't think much of some of Miss Kitty's beaux—jes' didn't want her to get married nohow—'specially that there Major Wallace. An' she ups an' tells Miss Kitty she mus' get rid o' him, or she would—"

"Would what—?"

"Git rid o' him," explained Oscar. "Miss Susan jes' despised him, even if he did lay himself out to please her."

"Was Major Wallace there on Sunday?" inquired the coroner.

"No, Sah." With vigorous emphasis. "The Major ain't been there for mos' two weeks. Miss Susan and him had words."

"Ah, indeed. When?"

"'Bout two weeks ago, p'r'aps longer. Major Wallace kep' callin', an' Miss Susan up an' tole him Miss Kitty couldn't be bothered with his company." Oscar came to a breathless pause. He had caught sight of a man leaving his seat and recognized Major Leigh Wallace. The next second the door

had opened and closed behind Wallace's retreating figure.

Penfield's stern voice recalled Oscar's wandering wits.

"Did you do the marketing on Saturday, Oscar?" he asked.

"Yes, Sah." Oscar spoke more cheerfully at the change of the topic.

"Did you buy some peaches for Miss Baird?"

"Deed, I didn't, Sah. Miss Susan hadn't no money to buy peaches at dis time o' year," Oscar's voice expressed astonishment. "Dis hyar month am March."

"We have them from California." Penfield was growing impatient, and his manner stiffened as he faced the old negro. "Who purchased the peaches which Miss Baird was eating just before she died?"

"I dunno, Sah; honest to God, I dunno." Oscar shook a puzzled head. "I was flabbergasted to see them peaches on the tea table. They weren't in the house when I was gettin' dinner, an' they weren't there when I left after servin' dinner."

"Is that so?" Penfield stared at Oscar. The black face of the negro was as shiny as a billiard ball and about as expressionless. "That is all, Oscar, you may retire."

Hardly waiting for the servant to descend the steps, Penfield turned to the deputy coroner whose

busy pen had been transcribing the notes of the inquest.

"Dr. Fisher, take the stand," he directed, and waited in silence while he was being sworn.

"You performed the autopsy, Doctor?" he asked.

"I did, Sir, in the presence of the Morgue Master and Dr. Leonard McLean," responded the deputy coroner.

"State the results of the autopsy."

"We found on investigation of the gastric contents that death was due to prussic acid, the most active of poisons," Fisher replied, with blunt directness. "There was no other cause of death, as from the condition of her body, we found Miss Baird, in spite of her age, did not suffer from any organic disease."

The silence lengthened in the court room. Penfield did not seem in haste to put the next question and the suspense deepened.

"Can you estimate how long a time must have elapsed between Miss Baird taking the poison and her death?" he asked finally.

"Between two and five minutes, judging from the amount of poison in her system," responded Fisher.

"Can you tell us how the poison was administered, Doctor?" questioned Penfield. "Did you analyze the contents of the tea pot and cup?"

"Yes. No trace of poison was in either the cup

or the teapot." Fisher spoke with deliberation, conscious that his words were listened to with breathless interest. "There was on her plate a half-eaten peach on which still remained enough poison to kill several persons."

Penfield broke the tense pause.

"Have you any idea, Doctor, how the poison got on the peach?"

"On examination we found that drops of prussic acid still remained on the fruit knife used to cut the peach." Fisher hesitated a brief instant, then continued, "The poison had been put on one side of the knife-blade only."

"You mean—"

"That whoever ate the other portion of the peach was not poisoned."

CHAPTER VII

MRS. PARSONS HAS CALLERS

CORONER'S INQUEST RETURNS OPEN VERDICT

Miss Susan Baird Killed by Party or Parties Unknown

MRS. AMOS PARSONS laid down her evening newspaper and stared at her own reflection in the upright, silver-framed mirror standing on the table by her side. So absorbing were her thoughts that she did not observe a velvet-footed servant remove the tea tray and carry off the soiled cups and saucers. The French clock on the high mantel of the drawing room had ticked away fully ten minutes before she stirred. With an indolent gesture of her hands, eminently characteristic, she dropped them in her lap and let her body relax against the tufted chair back. Her mirror told her that she needed rest; the deep shadows under her eyes and her unusual pallor both emphasized the same story. She was very, very weary.

"Beg pardon, Madam." The velvet-footed butler was back in the room again, silver salver in hand. "A gentleman to see you."

Mrs. Parsons picked up the small visiting card and adjusting her lorgnette, inspected the engraved lettering it bore.

MR. BENJAMIN POTTER

Cosmos Club

"Where is Mr. Potter?" she asked.

"In the reception room downstairs, madam. He said he was in a great hurry, Madam," as she remained silent. "He asked particularly to see you."

"Very well; show him up. Wait—" as the servant started for the doorway. "Bring Mr. Potter upstairs in the lift."

"Very good, Madam," and, a second later, Mrs. Parsons was alone in her drawing room.

Leaning forward, she looked about the beautifully furnished room, then, convinced that she was its only occupant, she opened her vanity case and selecting a lip-stick, applied it, and added a touch of rouge. Lastly a powder-puff removed all outward traces of restless hours and weary waiting. She

had just time to slip the puff and lip-stick inside her vanity box before the portières parted and Ben Potter hastened into the room. He stopped his rapid stride on catching sight of her and advanced more leisurely.

"Good evening, Cecilia," he said, and paused in front of her.

She appeared not to see his half-extended hand, as she laid down her cigarette.

"Ah, Ben," she remarked dryly. "I see that you still believe in the efficacy of a bribe."

"If it is big enough," composedly. "Your servant said you had denied yourself to callers so—*voilà tout.*"

"And why this desire to see me?"

Potter did not reply at once; instead, he scrutinized her intently. She was well worth a second glance. Her type of face belonged to the Eighteenth Century, and as she sat in her high-backed chair, her prematurely grey hair, artistically arranged, in pretty contrast to her delicately arched eyebrows, she resembled a French marquise of the court of Louis XIV. She bore Potter's penetrating gaze with undisturbed composure. He was the first to shift his glance.

"Suppose I take a chair and we talk things over," he suggested. "You are not very cordial—to-night."

Mrs. Parsons smiled ironically. "Take a chair

by all means; that one by the door looks substantial. Now," as he dragged it over and placed it directly in front of her. "I will repeat my question—why do you wish to see me?"

"You ask that—and a newspaper by your side!" Potter pointed contemptuously at the paper lying on the floor. "Have you seen Kitty Baird since the inquest?"

Mrs. Parsons shook her head. "There was hardly time for her to get here; besides she must be very weary, not to say—unstrung." She held out her cigarette case, but Potter waved it away, making no effort politely to restrain his impatience. "So dear Miss Susan Baird was poisoned after all."

"And why 'after all'?" swiftly. "Why '*dear* Miss Susan'?"

A shrug of her shapely shoulders answered him. "You are always so intense, Ben," she remarked. "Why *not* 'dear Miss Susan'? Had you any reason to dislike your cousin?"

"Had any one any reason to like her?" he asked gruffly. "You don't need to be told that." His smile had little mirth in it. "The poor soul is dead—murdered." He looked at her queerly. "How much does Kitty see of Major Leigh Wallace?"

Mrs. Parsons selected another cigarette with care. "So that is the reason I am honored by a visit from you." Tossing back her head, she inspected him

from head to foot. "How am I qualified to answer your question? I am not Kitty's guardian."

"No, but you are her employer," with quiet emphasis. "And Major Wallace is a frequent caller here."

"Is he?" Her smile was enigmatical. "May I ask the reason of your sudden interest in Major Wallace?"

Potter colored hotly. "That is my affair," he retorted. "Were you at the Baird inquest this morning?"

"No."

"Have you read the newspaper account of it?"

"Yes."

"And what is your opinion?"

She shook her head. "I have formed none."

"Oh, come!" Potter smiled skeptically, then frowned. "Kitty must be safeguarded," he announced with gruff abruptness.

"From Major Wallace?—"

"Perhaps—"

She considered him a moment in silence. Potter's big frame did not show to best advantage in his sack suit which betrayed the need of sponging and pressing. The naturalist seldom gave a thought to his personal appearance.

"How is your wife?" she asked.

Potter started a trifle at the abrupt question.

"Quite well," he replied. "But a bit fagged after the inquest. She was one of the witnesses, you know."

"And you—"

"I was not called by the coroner," shortly. "Ted Rodgers and I sat together in the court room. He's a good chap, Ted—promised Kitty to help trace her aunt's murderer."

The pupils of Mrs. Parsons' eyes contracted. "I did not realize that they were on such terms of intimacy," she remarked, and her voice had grown sharper. "Do you think Mr. Rodgers will have a difficult task?"

Potter ran his fingers through his untidy grey hair. "That remains to be seen," he replied. "So far, all that we know is that my cousin, Miss Susan Baird, was poisoned with prussic acid."

"Is that all the police know?" she questioned rapidly.

He did not answer immediately, his attention apparently centered on the newspaper which lay folded so that the headlines were in view:.

Coroner's Inquest Returns Open Verdict

"It is all that the police will admit knowing," he said at last. "I must remind you that you have not

answered my question: how often does Kitty see Major Wallace?"

"I am unable to tell you." There was a touch of insolence in her manner and his eyes sparkled with anger. "I do not keep tab on Kitty—" their glances crossed— "and I don't intend to."

Potter hesitated a second, then rose. "It was good of you to see me," he announced. His tone was perfunctory. "My interest in Kitty prompted the visit." He stooped over and picked up a glove which had slipped from his restless fingers to the floor. "Good-by. Don't trouble to ring for James; I know my way out."

But Mrs. Parsons was already half across the room and her finger touched the electric button with some force. James was a trifle out of breath when he reached them.

"Take Mr. Potter down in the lift," she directed. "Good evening, Ben," and with a slight, graceful gesture, she dismissed him.

Once more back in her chair Mrs. Parsons settled down in comfort and permitted her thoughts to wander far afield. It was not often that she allowed herself to dwell on the past.

"So Ted Rodgers is taking a hand in the game," she murmured, unconscious that she spoke aloud. "And Ben Potter is interested in—Kitty." Putting back her head, she laughed heartily. She was still

chuckling to herself when James, the butler, came in to announce dinner.

Dinner with Mrs. Parsons was a formal affair even when alone, and she looked with approval at the spotless linen, the burnished silver, and glittering glass. She thoroughly appreciated her butler's taste in table decoration. Domestic troubles, which vexed other women, never touched her household. She had one theory which she always put into practice—to pay her servants just a little more than her neighbors gave their domestics, and it was seldom that they left her employ.

Washington society had found that Mrs. Parsons was wealthy enough to indulge in her whims, and, bringing, as she did, letters of introduction from far-off California to influential residents of the national Capital, she had been entertained at houses to which newcomers frequently waited for years to gain the *entrée.* Well gowned, handsome rather than pretty, quick of wit, Mrs. Parsons soon attained a place for herself in the kaleidoscopic life of the cosmopolitan city, and, giving up her suite of rooms at the New Willard had, three months before, purchased a house on fashionable Wyoming Avenue.

On taking possession of what she termed her *maisonnette,* Mrs. Parsons decided that she had need of a social secretary. Kitty Baird had been highly recommended for the post by Charles Craige, and,

after much urging on the part of both Mrs. Parsons and her godfather, Kitty had resigned her clerkship in the Department of State, which she had held during the World War, and taken up her secretarial duties.

And Kitty had been of genuine aid to her employer, as Mrs. Parsons acknowledged to herself if to no one else—she was chary of spoken praise. Kitty had not only an accurate knowledge of social life in Washington, having enjoyed belleship since her first "tea dance" at Rauscher's which one of her aunt's old friends had given in her honor, but possessed unbounded tact and a kindly heart. Her aunt, Miss Susan Baird, had seen to it that she was well educated and thoroughly grounded in French and German. Having a natural gift for languages, Kitty had put her early training to good account in her war work as a translator and code expert.

To James' secret distress, Mrs. Parsons partook but indifferently of the deliciously cooked dinner, even refusing dessert which, to his mind, was inexplicable.

"Has Miss Kitty Baird telephoned at any time to-day?" she asked, laying down her napkin.

"No, Madam." James concealed his surprise. It was not like Mrs. Parsons to repeat herself, and to his best recollection, and he had a good memory, she had asked that same question at least a dozen times.

"Will you have coffee served in the drawing room, Madam?"

"I don't care for coffee to-night, thanks." Mrs. Parsons picked up her scarf and rose. "Tell Anton that if any one calls this evening, I am at home."

"Very good, Madam," and James held back the portières for her as she left the room.

Mrs. Parsons did not return to the drawing room; instead she made her way to the "den" at the end of the hall, a pretty square room, which served as a lounge and library. Once there she paused by the telephone stand and laid her hand on the instrument.

"West, 789." She was forced to repeat the number several times before Central got it correctly.

There was a brief wait, then came the answer, "Line disconnected, ma'am," and she heard Central ring off. Mrs. Parsons put down the instrument in bewildered surprise. "Why had Kitty Baird's telephone been disconnected?" She was still considering the puzzle as she rearranged some "bridesmaids' roses" in a vase. By it lay a note in Charles Craige's fine penmanship. Picking up the note, Mrs. Parsons read it for perhaps the twentieth time.

It ran:

My precious Cecelia:

I am disconsolate that I cannot dine with you tonight. I have promised to see Kitty—poor girl, she needs all the sympathy and help we can give her. Miss me just a little and I shall be contented. My thoughts are with you always.

Ever faithfully,

Charles Craige.

"Beg pardon, Madam." James the obsequious stood in the room, card tray in hand. "Major Leigh Wallace is waiting for you in the drawing room."

Mrs. Parsons folded the note and slipped it inside her knitting bag. "Ask Major Wallace to come here," she said, pausing to switch on a floor lamp, the light from which cast a becoming glow on her as she selected a chair beside it, and took up her embroidery.

"Ah, Leigh, good evening," she exclaimed a moment later as the young officer stood by her. "Have you come to make your peace with me?"

"In what way have I offended?" Wallace asked.

"You were so rude to one of my guests at my tea yesterday." Mrs. Parsons watched him as he made himself comfortable in a dainty settee under the lamp.

"Rude to one of your guests? Impossible!"

ejaculated Wallace in surprise. "To whom do you refer?"

"Nina Potter." Mrs. Parsons had not taken her eyes off him, and she caught the sudden shifting of his gaze. "Why are you and she no longer friendly?"

"You are mistaken." Wallace spoke stiffly. "We are—I am still a great admirer of hers—"

"And Kitty—"

Wallace flushed to the roots of his sandy hair. "Kitty never had very much use for me," he admitted, rather bitterly. "She—she—seems to be tired—"

"Of being a cat's paw?"

"Mrs. Parsons!" Wallace was on his feet, his eyes snapping with anger.

"Don't go," Mrs. Parsons' smile was ingratiating. "Forgive me if I blunder, Leigh. Sometimes an outsider sees most of the game. Will you take a friendly piece of advice—"

"Surely," but Wallace was slow in reseating himself.

"Then avoid Ben Potter." Mrs. Parsons picked up her neglected embroidery, and did not trouble to glance at her guest.

Wallace's attempt at a laugh was something of a failure. "I saw Potter an hour ago at the club," he volunteered. "He told me that he and his wife were leaving for New York to-night."

"Indeed." Mrs. Parsons held her needle nearer the light and threaded it with deft fingers. "Is Kitty Baird going with them?"

"I believe not." Wallace moved a trifle and shaded his face with his hand. "I've just come from 'Rose Hill.' "

"And how is Kitty? Did you see her?" Mrs. Parsons spoke with such rapidity that her questions ran together.

"No." Wallace compressed his lips. "She sent down word that she begged to be excused."

"Oh!" Mrs. Parsons lowered her embroidery and regarded her companion. He looked wretchedly ill, and the haggard lines were deeper than ever. For a man of his height and breadth of shoulder, he seemed to have shrunken, for his clothes appeared to hang upon him. Dwelling on his ill health would not tend to lessen Wallace's nervous condition, and Mrs. Parsons omitted personalities. "Were you at the Baird inquest?" she inquired.

"Yes, that is, I got there late—" stumbling somewhat in his speech. "Why don't you go and see Kitty, Cecelia? That house of hers is sort of ghastly—"

"For any one who suffers from nerves," she put in, and he flushed at the irony of her tone, "Kitty has plenty of courage. I—" she smiled. "I am in-

clined to think that Kitty has inherited some of her aunt's prejudices—"

"She couldn't inherit any likes—that abominable aunt of hers hated everybody." Wallace spoke with such bitter feeling that Mrs. Parsons restrained a smile with difficulty.

"Poor Kitty," her tone was full of sympathy. "I am glad she has Ted Rodgers to lean on."

Wallace flushed angrily. "He's the one who has made all the trouble," he began. "If it hadn't been for his—"

"What?" as Wallace came to an abrupt halt.

"Oh, nothing." Wallace beat the devil's tattoo on the chair arm. "I must be going, Cecelia. It's a beastly bore having to turn in early, but I must obey the doctor's orders."

"You certainly should take better care of yourself." Mrs. Parsons walked with Wallace to the door of the room. The house was an English basement in design, and as they came to the top of the flight of steps leading to the ground floor, Wallace held out his hand. It felt feverish to the touch and Mrs. Parsons regarded him with growing concern. "Stop and see Dr. McLean on your way home," she advised.

"I'm all right." Wallace laughed recklessly. "Don't worry, I take a lot of killing. Good night." And, squeezing her hand until the pressure forced

her rings into the tender skin, he released it and ran down the steps.

Mrs. Parsons lingered long enough to hear James assisting Wallace into his overcoat and then went thoughtfully into her drawing room. The footman had left one of the window shades up and Mrs. Parsons paused to pull it down. The street was well lighted from the electric lamp opposite her doorway, and, as she stood idly looking out of the window, she saw Major Leigh Wallace start to cross the street, hesitate at the curb, turn to his left and walk eastward. He had gone but a short distance when Mrs. Parsons saw a man slip out from the doorway of the next house and start down the street after Wallace. Halfway down the block Wallace crossed the street and without glancing backward continued on his way, his shadow at his heels.

Mrs. Parsons watched them out of sight, her eyes big with suppressed excitement. When she finally pulled down the window shade her hand was not quite steady.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CASE OF THE GILA MONSTER

UNAWARE that he had a place in Mrs. Parsons' meditations as well as in her conversation with Major Leigh Wallace, Ted Rogers parked his car near the entrance to "Rose Hill." His ring at the front door bell was answered by Mandy, the ebony shadow of Oscar, her husband.

"Kin yo' see Miss Kitty?" She repeated the question after him. "Why, I 'spect yo' kin, Mister Rodgers. Jes' step inside, Sah, an' I'll go find Miss Kitty."

Closing the front door and putting up the night latch with much jingling, Mandy led Rodgers down the hall to the entrance of the library.

"The lamps am lighted in hyar," she said by way of explanation. "Ole Miss never used to let Miss Kitty have a light in de odder rooms on dis flo', cept when Oscar was a-servin' dinner. An' we all got so we jes' never thought o' carryin' a lamp into

de parlor. Make yo'self comfortable, Sah, I'll tell Miss Kitty an' she'll be down terec'ly."

With a word of thanks Rodgers passed the old servant and entered the library. The light from the two oil lamps was supplemented by a cheerful fire in the brick chimney at the farther end of the room, and its cheerful glow did much to dispel the dreary atmosphere which prevailed.

Rodgers did not at once sit down. Instead he paused in the center of the library and gravely regarded the tea table and the throne-shaped chair where he had frequently seen Miss Susan Baird sitting when entertaining guests at tea. He had a retentive memory, and as his eyes roved about the library, he pieced out the scene of the discovery of the dead woman as described on the witness stand by Inspector Mitchell.

As far as Rodgers could judge, no change had been made in the room, except in the arrangement of the tea table. The soiled dishes and tea cups had been removed, the tea service cleaned and put back, and the fruit dish, of Royal Dresden china of ancient pattern, was empty. Forgetful of the passing time, he wandered about examining with keen attention the fine oil paintings of dead and gone Bairds, the camels' hair shawls which had been converted into portières, the Persian rugs on the hardwood floor.

What matter that all showed traces of wear and tear? The room was cleanliness personified.

Genteel poverty—his surroundings cried of it. Rodgers thought, with a tightening of his heart-strings, of Kitty's brave endeavor to keep up the old home and provide her aunt with every comfort within her means. And her aunt had been murdered. Murdered! He shook his head in bewilderment. What possible motive could have inspired such a crime? Who would murder a poverty-stricken old woman? Avarice—where was the gain? Revenge—for what? Hate—why hate a feeble old woman? There remained robbery as a possible motive. Could it be that?

Rodgers crossed over to the "Dutch" door and examined it with interest. Neither its lock nor its solid panels gave indication of having been forced open. From the door his attention passed to the three small windows, placed just under the flooring of the gallery; they appeared tightly closed and resisted his efforts to move them. The library gained its chief light in the daytime from the skylight and the windows opening upon the gallery.

Turning around, Rodgers stood hesitating, his head slightly bent to catch the faintest sound. He had heard, some moments before, Mandy's halting footsteps as she came limping down the staircase, then along the hall to the basement stairs, and the

shutting of the door after her descending figure. He looked at his watch; ten minutes had elapsed since his arrival and still Kitty had not appeared. Surely she would have sent word by Mandy if she had not wished him to wait? He took from his pocket a crumpled note and smoothed it out. The act had become a habit. He did not need to read the few lines penned on the paper—he knew them by heart.

Come to-night. I must see you. K. B.

He had obeyed the summons eagerly. Kitty had asked him to find out who killed her aunt. And the inquest had brought out what?—that Miss Susan Baird had come to her death through poison administered by a party or parties unknown. It had also disclosed the fact that the last person to see Miss Susan alive was Kitty Baird, and Oscar had testified that aunt and niece had quarreled that fatal Sunday afternoon—over Major Leigh Wallace. Rodgers whitened at the thought. Were Kitty and Wallace really engaged, as he had been given to understand by no less a person than Ben Potter? If so, he cut a sorry figure dancing attendance upon Kitty. She had grown to be all in all to him. It was a case of the moth and the candle. Rodgers smiled wryly; he could not tear himself away, even if he would, and she had asked him to aid her!

Rodgers squared his shoulders. As soon as the mystery of Miss Susan Baird's death was solved, he would leave Washington and give Wallace a clear field. Kitty was entitled to happiness.

Tired of inaction, harassed by his thought, Rodgers tramped about the room and finally paused in front of the fireplace. Mouchette, Kitty's Angora cat, rolled over at his approach and yawned sleepily. She had awakened at his entrance, but the comfort of an excellent dinner and the heat of the fire had proven too strong to keep her awake, and she had curled up again and gone to sleep.

The hearth was set far back and two benches were framed on either hand by the walls of the chimney. They looked inviting, and, after giving Mouchette a final pat, Rodgers dropped down on one of the benches, his broad back braced across the corner of the wall, while his long legs were stretched out toward the fire burning so briskly on the hearth. He watched the play of the firelight with unconscious intensity, his mind picturing Kitty's alluring personality. A log broke and as the burning embers struck the hearth, sparks flew out and upward. One landed on the bench on which Rodgers was sitting and he leaned forward to knock it back upon the hearth. As his hand struck the bench a glancing blow, he felt the wood give and the next instant he was gazing into a small hole.

Rodgers stared at it in deep surprise. Bending closer he saw that he must have touched a concealed spring which released the trap-door. It was not a large cavity into which he peered, hardly a foot deep and about six inches square, or so he judged in the fitful glow of the fire. He sat for a moment perfectly still, then drawing out his matchbox, struck a light and held it carefully so that its rays fell directly into the small hole. It was empty except for a medium-sized brass key to which was tied a small tag. Bending nearer, he made out the scrawled lines with some difficulty:

This key unlocks the inside drawer of the highboy in the blue room on the fourth floor.

A bell reverberating through the silent house caused Rodgers to spring up and look into the hall, in time to see Mandy emerge from behind the door leading to the basement stairs and make her way to the front of the house. A murmur of voices reached Rodgers, then a firm tread sounded down the uncarpeted hall, and parting the portières Charles Craige walked into the library.

"Hello, Rodgers," he exclaimed in hearty greeting. "Mandy told me that you were here. Have you seen Kitty?"

"Not yet." Rodgers shook Craige's hand with

vigor. He had grown to like and admire the brilliant lawyer whose many acts of kindness had added to the enjoyment of his visit. Besides, and Rodgers' eyes glowed, was he not Kitty's godfather!

"Trust Kitty to keep a man waiting," and Craige smiled as he spoke, then grew grave. "This is a devilish bad business—not to say shocking. Poor Susan—the last person in the world whose death would have been of benefit to any one, and yet she was murdered."

"If we are to believe the medical evidence, yes," replied Rodgers. "Poison can be administered with murderous intent, but we must also remember that it can be taken with the intent to commit suicide."

"True." Craige chose a seat at some distance from the throne-shaped chair. "But I cannot associate either murder or suicide with Susan. I tell you, Rodgers, Susan had an intense desire to live, and I can conceive of no one wishing for her death sufficiently to face the gallows."

"But the fact remains that she either did away with herself or was cold-bloodedly murdered," retorted Rodgers.

Craige nodded his head moodily. "If murder, it was cold-blooded, premeditated murder," he agreed. "Hush, here comes Kitty."

A door had opened on the gallery and Kitty appeared from her bedroom, stood for a moment

hesitating, then hurrying forward she almost ran down the short flight of steps to the library. She paused by the newel post as both men advanced to meet her.

"I am so glad you are here," she exclaimed, extending her hands impulsively to each. "It has been so dreadful—alone."

Craige laid a sympathetic hand on her shoulder and patted her gently as he kissed her. "We understand," he said. "Now, what can we do for you?"

Rodgers, who still held Kitty's hand in both of his, released it reluctantly. He was slow of speech, but his eyes, meeting Kitty's gaze, conveyed a message all their own. As Kitty preceded them across the library, a warm blush mantled her cheeks.

"Sit here, Miss Baird." Rodgers placed a chair for her near the chimney while Craige pulled forward two others. Grateful for the warmth from the fire, for her bedroom was insufficiently heated, Kitty stretched out her hands to the blaze.

"Why is your telephone disconnected, Kitty?" asked Craige, after a brief silence which neither Kitty or Rodgers made any attempt to break.

"We were deluged with calls," she explained. "Especially the newspaper reporters." She shivered slightly. "They gave Mandy no rest."

"But to cut yourself off from your friends, Kitty,

was that wise?" chided Craige gently. "No one could reach you—I tried and failed."

"It did not stop your coming over to ask for me," she put in gratefully. "Ben and Nina Potter stopped for a second before dinner. They left for New York to-night."

"Indeed?" Craige frowned. "They should have remained here with you," noting with concern the dark shadows under her eyes and the forlorn droop to her usually erect shoulders. "You must not stay here alone."

"But I am not alone," she protested. "Dear, faithful Mandy is with me."

Craige shook his head, unsatisfied. "Mandy is an ignorant colored woman, old at that," he remarked. "You must have companionship—woman's companionship of your own class. Why not ask Cecilia Parsons?"

"Oh, I would not think of asking her," Kitty objected quickly. "She is so—so sensitive, so—" hunting about for the proper word. "Oh, the house, all this—would get frightfully on her nerves."

At mention of Mrs. Parsons' name, Rodgers glanced from one to the other, finally letting his gaze rest on the lawyer's kindly, clever face. He had heard the rumor connecting the pretty widow's name with Charles Craige, and that reports of their engagement persisted, in spite of Mrs. Parsons'

laughing denial and Craige's skillfully evasive answers to all questions on the subject.

"As you please, Kitty," replied Craige. "But I think that you are wrong not to ask Mrs. Parsons. She would not hesitate to tell you if she did not wish to come. She is frankness itself."

Kitty raised her eyebrows and a ghost of a smile crossed her lips. "Mrs. Parsons is always most kind," she remarked, "but I prefer not to tax her friendship."

The look Craige cast in her direction was a bit sharp, and with some abruptness he changed the subject.

"Were you wise to have your aunt's body put in the vault this afternoon, Kitty?" he asked. "Did you not overtax your strength? You look so utterly weary."

"I am stronger that I appear." Kitty passed her hand across her eyes. "I could see no object in waiting. Coroner Penfield suggested that we have simple funeral ceremonies immediately after the inquest. I tried to get word to you, but failed. It was but prolonging the agony to wait—" with a catch in her throat, "there was nothing to be gained by waiting. It would not bring her back. Oh, poor Aunt Susan!" And bowing her head Kitty gave vent to the tears she had held back for many, many hours.

Rodgers watched her in unhappy silence. Could he find nothing to say—do nothing to comfort her? He half rose impulsively to his feet—caught Craige's eye and sat down again. Craige leaned forward and put his arms about the weeping girl and soothed her with loving words. When she grew more composed, he rose and paced up and down the library.

"Had I not better call Mandy and let her put you to bed, Kitty?" he asked, stopping by her chair. "You can see us to-morrow when you are more composed."

"No, wait." Kitty sat up and attempted to smile. "I am all right, now. Is it true, as the papers said, that Aunt Susan died from poison placed on a peach she was eating?"

"If we are to believe the medical evidence, yes. Chemical tests proved that prussic acid still remained on one side of the blade of the fruit knife used to cut the peach."

Kitty shuddered. "Who could have planned so diabolical a murder?" she demanded.

"That is for us to find out." Kitty looked up quickly at sound of Rodgers' clear voice. "Tell me, Miss Baird, have you no idea where the peaches came from?"

"Not the slightest," she shook her head. "I am positive there were no peaches in the house when I left here Sunday afternoon. They are very ex-

pensive at this season of the year and," with downright frankness, "we could not afford to buy them, although Aunt Susan was inordinately fond of them."

"Some one must have sent the peaches who was aware of your aunt's liking for the fruit," Craige remarked thoughtfully. "Had she spoken of peaches to any of your friends lately?"

"Friends!" Kitty looked at him with dawning horror. "You don't think—you don't mean that a *friend* killed Aunt Susan?" She thrust out her hands as if warding off some frightful nightmare. "No, no. It was a housebreaker—a common, ordinary housebreaker."

"It may have been a housebreaker," agreed Rodgers, soothingly. "But it was one with the knowledge that the flavor of a peach would disguise the taste of prussic acid."

"Kitty," Craige spoke with deep seriousness. "You must realize that this murder of your aunt was a deliberately planned crime. Burglars don't go around carrying bottles of prussic acid in their pockets. Also, there is one point of especial significance—but one side of the knife blade had poison on it."

"You mean—?" She questioned him with frightened eyes.

"That some one whom your aunt knew must have

been taking tea with her, and in administering the poison saw to it that *his* side of the peach was harmless," Craige responded.

Kitty looked at the two men dumbly. Craige had put into words what she had dimly realized.

"It is dreadful!" she gasped. "What possible motive could have inspired her murder?"

Craige looked at Rodgers, then drawing out his leather wallet he selected a newspaper clipping and ran his eyes down the printed column.

"Tell us, Kitty," and his voice was coaxing. "Is it true that you and your aunt quarreled on Sunday as Oscar testified?"

Kitty blanched and her eyes shifted from Rodgers to the glowing embers on the hearth.

"It wasn't a quarrel," she declared faintly. "Aunt Susan and I had a few words—"

"Yes," prompted Craige. "A few words about what?"

"About money matters." Kitty did not look at either man. Rodgers' heart sank. Oscar had also testified that the quarrel was about Major Leigh Wallace. Could it be that Kitty was prevaricating? He put the thought from him. Oscar *must* have lied.

"About money matters," Craig repeated, returning the clipping and wallet to his pocket. "Then

why did you not tell that to Coroner Penfield when he questioned you in the witness stand?"

"It wasn't his business—it had nothing to do with Aunt Susan's death," she stated incoherently. "And," with a slow, painful blush, "our poverty, our painful economies were bad enough without discussing them in public."

"Oh!" Craige cast a doubtful look at Rodgers, but the latter's expressionless face gave the keen-witted lawyer no clue as to his opinion of Kitty's statement. "Kitty, were you your aunt's nearest relative?"

"Yes. Ben Potter is a second couisn, I believe." Kitty paused. "Ben has not been here very much lately."

"Since his marriage, you mean?" asked Craige.

Kitty glanced up and then away. "Yes. Aunt Susan poked fun at him at the time of his marriage, said she did not care for 'poor whites,' and Ben was very angry."

"Was there ever an open quarrel?"

"Oh, no. Outwardly, they were good friends; and they dined here usually once a month," Kitty explained. "But relations were strained a little bit."

"Could you not make Ben and Nina a visit when they return from New York?" asked Craige.

"I can, if I wish," with quick resentment. "But I prefer to stay in this house."

"Just a moment, Kitty," Craige held up a cautioning hand. "This house belonged to your aunt, did it not?"

"Yes. But I—" she hesitated. "I ran the house with the money I earned. I can still do that."

"True, if the house is left to you." Kitty stared at her godfather aghast. "Did your aunt leave her will in your care?"

"No."

"Did she ever speak to you of a will?"

"No; she never mentioned the subject."

Craige looked at her thoughtfully. "It may be that your aunt made no will," he said finally. "I transacted such legal matters as she brought to me, but I never drew up a will."

"But as Miss Baird is her aunt's nearest living relative, would she not inherit her aunt's property?" asked Rodgers.

"Possibly; but Ben Potter may claim his share of the estate," the lawyer pointed out.

"Estate!" broke in Kitty with a nervous laugh. "Poor Aunt Susan had only this house and its delapidated furniture. Ben is welcome to his share."

"Just a moment," Craige interrupted in his turn. "Your aunt must have left a will or some legal document regarding the disposal of her property. She had a great habit of tucking her papers away. You recollect our search for the tax receipts, Kitty?"

Kitty's face brightened into one of her mischievous smiles, while her eyes twinkled.

"Aunt Susan was secretive," she acknowledged. "It was a case of searching for lump sugar even, when she was in the mood for hiding things."

"Hiding!" Rodgers rose to his feet and his eyes sought the bench where he had found the trap-door. "Come here, Miss Baird," and he beckoned them to approach. "I opened that by accident just before Mr. Craige arrived—see."

Kitty slipped her hand inside the cavity and drew out the key.

"I remember the trap-door," she said. "If you press on a spring concealed in one of the boards, the door drops inward. But what does this tag mean?" and they read the words aloud:

This key unlocks the inside drawer of the highboy in the blue room on the fourth floor.

"Let us go and see what it means," suggested Rodgers, and Craige nodded his agreement.

"Lead the way, Kitty," he added. "Do you need a lamp?"

"There is a candlestick outside my bedroom door, and we can light the gas jets as we go through the halls," she replied.

Pausing only long enough to pick up several small

match boxes, she led the way out of the library and up the long staircase. A light was burning dimly in the first hall and Rodgers turned it up before following Kitty and her godfather to the next story. From there they hurried to the fourth floor, Kitty's candle but intensifying the darkness.

The stuffy atmosphere of a room long unused greeted them as they entered a large square room facing the front of the house. With the aid of her candle, Kitty located the one gas jet and by its feeble rays they looked about them. The room evidently obtained its name from its faded blue wall paper. The old four-post bed and the massive mahogany furniture belonged to another and richer generation, but Rodgers had no time to investigate its beauties, his attention being focussed on a high-boy standing near one of the windows. Kitty again read the message on the tag before approaching the highboy.

"The inside drawer," she repeated. "What does she mean?"

For answer Rodgers pulled open the nearest drawer. It was filled with old finery, and after tumbling its contents about, Kitty closed it.

"Try the next," suggested Craige. The second drawer proved equally unproductive of result, and it was with growing discouragement that they went through the next three and found them also unin-

teresting. On pulling out the last drawer Kitty found it arranged as a writing desk.

"I have seen this kind before," Rodgers felt along the front of the drawer; there was a faint click and the front woodwork swung aside, disclosing an inside drawer.

Kitty slipped the key she was carrying into the lock. It turned with a slight squeaking sound, showing the need of oil, and Kitty drew open the drawer. Inside it lay another brass key also tagged.

"What does it say?" she asked as Rodgers picked it up.

He read:

This key unlocks the lower left hand drawer of the sideboard in the dining room.

"Is that your aunt's handwriting?"

"Yes." Kitty looked as mystified as she felt. "Shall we go downstairs and look in the sideboard?"

"Of course." As he spoke, Craige started for the door. It took them but a few minutes to reach the dining room, and it was with a sense of rising excitement that Kitty unlocked the "lower left hand drawer" of the sideboard.

"Good gracious! Another key!" she gasped, and held it up so that both men could read the tag tied to it.

The message ran:

This key unlocks the linen trunk in the attic.

"Upon my word your aunt outdid herself!" exclaimed Craige. "Come, Kitty, as long as we have started this investigation, we must complete it."

Not having anticipated having to return to the top of the house, Rodgers had carefuly put out all the lights, and relighting the gas jets delayed them somewhat. Kitty's candle had almost burned itself out when they entered the cold and unfriendly attic. No gas pipes had been placed there, and Rodgers was thankful that his electric torch, which he carried when motoring at night, was in his pocket. By its rays Kitty recognized the old-fashioned brass-bound hair trunk in which her aunt had kept some precious pieces of hand woven linen.

Crouching down on the floor with Rodgers holding his torch so that she could see the best, Kitty turned the key in the lock and threw back the lid of the trunk. On the spotless white linen lay a small brass key with a tag twice its size. The message it bore read:

This key unlocks the case of the Gila monster.

"The case of the Gila monster," repeated Rodgers. "What did your aunt mean?"

"I know!" Kitty clapped her hands. "Ben Potter spent the summer with Aunt Susan two years ago and he left one of his cases here. It contains the plaster cast of a Gila monster."

"And where is the case?" asked Craige.

"In the library."

"Then let us go there at once. You will catch cold up in this icy place, Kitty." Observing that she was shivering, Craige closed the trunk with a resounding bang, drew out the key, and preceded them out of the attic.

Back in the library again, Kitty walked over to a Japanese screen, which cut off one corner of the room, and pushing it aside, disclosed a low oak case on which rested a glass box. Inside the box lay the cast of a Gila monster. The poisonous lizard looked so alive that Rodgers was startled for a moment. Bending closer, he viewed its wedge-shaped head and black and yellow mottled body with deep interest.

"So that is the end of our search!" Kitty laughed ruefully. "Aunt Susan had a remarkable sense of humor."

"Wait a bit," exclaimed Rodgers. "Why not unlock the case?"

"If you wish—" Kitty inserted the key in the

lock and pulled down the glass door of the box, and she and her companions stared silently at the monster. Suddenly, Rodgers leaned forward and picked up the plaster cast. An exclamation broke from Craige.

"Papers at last!" he shouted. "Look, Kitty—Rodgers—" and as Rodgers removed the cast entirely out of the glass case, they saw that a part of the flooring of the box, which was built to resemble a sandy desert, came with the lizzard, leaving a cavity, or false bottom, in which lay some documents. Gathering them up, Craige walked over to the nearest lamp and drawing up a chair sat down.

"With your permission, Kitty," he said. "These papers are not sealed—shall I open them?"

"Certainly."

Craige pulled out a short half sheet of foolscap from the first envelope and read its contents aloud:

Know all present that I, Susan Baird, spinster, of Washington, D. C., being of sound mind, do give and devise to my niece, Katrina Baird, all I may die possessed of, real or personal property. This is a special bequest in view of her efforts to support me.

A list of my property and a key to my safe deposit boxes in the bank, certificates of ownership, etc., are placed here with this, my last will and testament.

Signed in the presence of:
Josiah Wilkins, Martha Hammond, and James Duncan, June 20, 1918.

Susan Baird.

Kitty and Rodgers stared at each other as Craige, laying aside the will, rapidly opened the three other documents and examined them. Kitty drew a long, long breath.

"So I get the old house after all," she said softly.

"You get far more than that, Kitty," Craige laid down the documents. "From these statements and certificates I find that your aunt owned many valuable stocks and bonds." He looked at the surprised girl for a moment, then added: "She has left you a fortune."

CHAPTER IX

MRS. PARSONS ASKS QUESTIONS

WASHINGTON society, or such portions of it as had known Miss Susan Baird in her lifetime, was agog over the latest development in the Baird tragedy; while Washingtonians personally unacquainted with the spinster were equally interested from motives of curiosity in the filing of her will. And all Washington, figuratively speaking, rubbed its eyes and read the newspapers assiduously, without, however, gaining much satisfaction. News from Police Headquarters was scant, and reporters resorted to theories in place of facts in trying to solve the murder of the "Miser of Rose Hill." Miss Susan Baird, in death, had emerged from the obscurity which had shrouded her in life.

Inspector Mitchell leaned forward in his chair, rested his elbows on the highly polished mahogany table-top and contemplated Mrs. Parsons with speculative interest. Three quarters of an hour before he had received a telephone message requesting him

to call upon her on, as her servant had stated, urgent business. He had spent ten minutes in conversation with Mrs. Parsons and had not received the faintest inkling as to why she wished to see him.

"May I ask, Madam," he began with direct bluntness, "what it is that you wish to see me about?"

Mrs. Parsons looked across the "den" to make sure that the door was closed. Satisfied on that point, she turned her attention to the inspector.

"I am anxious to have your bureau undertake a certain investigation for me," she said. "I will gladly meet all expenses, no matter how large they may be."

"Just a moment," broke in Mitchell. "Do you mean a private investigation?"

"Yes, I suppose so," somewhat doubtfully. "You might term it that. I want certain information about a—a person's past career—"

She stopped as Mitchell shook his head.

"We are public officials, Madam, employed by the District Government," he explained. "What you require is a private detective."

"But are they not untrustworthy?" she questioned. "I was told they very often sold you out to the person you wished watched."

"There are crooks in all trades, Madam," replied Mitchell. "There are also honest men. You are not obliged to pick a crooked detective to work for you."

"That is just it— Can you recommend a trustworthy person to—to—"

"To what, Madam?" as she came to a stammering halt.

"To learn certain facts in a person's life." She plucked nervously at her handkerchief as she waited for his answer.

"You will have to be more explicit, Madam," he said gravely. "Whose past life do you wish investigated and why?"

Mrs. Parsons paused in indecision; then with an air of perfect candor addressed the impatient inspector.

"Of course you will respect my confidence," she began. Mitchell nodded. "There is a certain man in Washington who has gained a welcome in the most exclusive homes," she paused. "I believe him to be an adventurer."

"Come, Mrs. Parsons, that is not being very explicit," remonstrated Mitchell. "To whom are you alluding?"

"A man calling himself Edward Rodgers."

Mitchell sat back and regarded her in unconcealed surprise.

"Edward Rodgers," he echoed. "You surely do not mean Edward Rodgers, the handwriting expert?"

"I do." His profound astonishment was a sap to

"That *his* Holt will was a forgery," interrupted Mitchell, pleased that he could again piece out her story and thereby prove his recollection of the case.

"That was his public confession," Mrs. Parsons lowered his voice. "What he told my husband under pledge of secrecy was that the *second* will was also a forgery."

"Second will?" sharply. "You mean the will produced by the nephew?"

"Exactly so."

"Well, good gracious!" Mitchell rubbed his head, perplexed in mind. "Why wasn't it proven a forgery then?"

"Because its legality was never questioned. You will recall that Colonel Holt's nephew produced letters and documents to prove his claim, and—" with a quiet smile—"every one's attention was centered on Jake Brown and the will he fostered. Jake *knew* his will was a forgery and his entire effort was to evade the law. It was not until he was serving his sentence that Jake's suspicions were aroused, and it was one of his fellow convicts who gave him the tip."

"And what was the tip?" asked Mitchell, as she paused.

"That Edward Rodgers turned his expert knowledge of handwriting and his skillful penmanship to good account—" calmly.

"You mean—"

"Jake told my husband that Edward Rodgers examined the spurious will when it was first offered for probate and discovered that it was a forgery. Keeping his knowledge to himself, Mr. Rodgers communicated with Colonel Holt's nephew and, for a consideration, drew up the will leaving all Colonel Holt's fortune to the nephew—"

"Oh, come," Mitchell's smile was skeptical. "The nephew, as next of kin, would have inherited the property when the first will was proven a forgery; for in that event Colonel Holt died intestate."

"But there was another relative who should have shared Colonel Holt's fortune in case the Colonel died without leaving a will," she explained.

"Oh!"

"Thus, to inherit his uncle's wealth the nephew had to produce a will in his favor," she went on. "It was clever to present a second spurious will under the protection, you might say, of a detected forged will around which interest centered. As far as I know, the second will was so cleverly drawn that it never aroused suspicion."

"And thus the nephew inherited his uncle's money." Mitchell stroked his chin thoughtfully. "What was Gentleman Jake's object in telling this—" he hesitated, torn between a sense of politeness and unbelief, "this story to your husband?"

"Jake said that he confided in him hoping that Mr. Parsons could catch Edward Rodgers tripping some day and send him to the 'pen,'" she replied.

"Did your husband place any faith in Jake's yarn?" he asked. "A cornered crook, like a cornered cat, will fight—and lie."

"On his deathbed?" She shook her head. "I think not. What had Jake to gain then?"

"Well, did your husband take any steps in exposing the second will?" asked Mitchell.

"My husband," her expression altered to one of deep sadness, "was killed in an automobile accident shortly after."

"Oh," Mitchell coughed slightly to cover his embarrassment. "Oh."

"Amos often discussed his cases with me," she added. "And Gentleman Jake's statements had aroused him to an unusual degree. He was thunderstruck at the effrontery of the crime and at its cleverness."

"It was a clever scheme," acknowledged Mitchell, "and probably succeeded through its very boldness. But, pardon me, Madam, you have brought forward no proof to substantiate your story."

"I am coming to that." Mrs. Parsons rose and walking over to a closet, beckoned to the inspector. Opening the door, she knelt down before a small

safe used to hold her table silver. From one of its compartments she took out a worn envelope.

"I forgot to tell you," she stated, shutting the door of the safe, "that the fellow convict who gave the tip to Gentleman Jake was up for burglary. Some time previous to his arrest he had entered Edward Rodgers' apartment in San Francisco and, among other things, stolen these papers. He sent them to my husband when released from the 'pen.' See for yourself," and she handed the envelope to Mitchell.

Returning to his old seat, Inspector Mitchell shook the contents of the envelope on the table, then laying it down he picked up a yellowish paper, which bore the signature: "John Holt" written over and over. The reverse was a letter in a stiff, Spencerian handwriting:

Dear Rodgers:

Call at my office to-morrow. I plan to destroy my last will, and would like you to locate my nephew, Leigh Wallace, for me.

Yours,

John Holt.

Without comment Mitchell laid aside the letter and picked up another paper. It bore the same signature, traced in varying forms of completeness, and

in one corner the name, "Leigh Wallace," was repeated again and again. The third and last paper was in the stiff handwriting of the letter signed by John Holt, and read:

I, John Holt, being in good health and of sound mind, do hereby revoke all other instruments and do declare this to be my last will and testament. I give and bequeath to my nephew, Leigh Wallace—

The remainder of the page was blank except for a large smudge of ink.

Inspector Mitchell laid the three sheets of paper side by side and examined them with care.

"Leigh Wallace," he said smilingly. "Is he any relation to the Major Leigh Wallace over whom Miss Baird and her niece, Miss Kitty, are said by Oscar to have quarreled on Sunday shortly before Miss Baird's murder?"

"He is the same man." Mrs. Parsons pushed aside the vase of flowers standing on the table so that she could obtain an unobstructed view of Mitchell and the papers lying in front of him. "Strange, is it not, that Major Leigh Wallace and Edward Rodgers should both be in Washington and both interested in the Baird murder?"

"Why strange?" Inspector Mitchell was not to

be drawn. "All Washington is interested in Miss Susan Baird's death."

"But not with such a *personal* interest." Mrs. Parsons' voice was honey sweet. "Edward Rodgers has promised to aid in tracing her murderer. Also, Colonel Holt was Kitty Baird's uncle."

"What—then she is the other relative you alluded to—?"

"Yes." She paused. "Colonel Holt died intestate and his property should have been divided equally between his nearest of kin, Kitty Baird, and her cousin, Leigh Wallace."

"But the forged will gave the entire fortune to Wallace," Mitchell spoke slowly.

"Which he has squandered," she added. "Leigh Wallace is cursed with an inherited vice—a craze for gambling."

Inspector Mitchell raised his head and regarded Mrs. Parsons. The silence lasted fully a minute, then picking up the three papers he replaced them in the worn envelope and pocketed it.

"You have given me valuable information," he said, rising. "It will not be necessary to call in a private detective. Good morning, Mrs. Parsons."

CHAPTER X

RUMORS

THE clerks in the outer office of "Craige and Lewis, Attorneys" looked up as the hall door opened with an unmistakable wrench and Ben Potter precipitated himself into the room. He brought up with some abruptness before the chief clerk's desk.

"Take my card at once to Mr. Craige," he directed. "Tell him I'm in the devil's hurry—late for an appointment now. Thank you," as an office boy hurried forward with a chair. "I prefer to stand."

The chief clerk, with one look at Potter's determined expression, decided it was best to swallow his dignity and execute Potter's peremptory request. He returned with unusual speed from the inner office.

"Mr. Craige will see you at once, Sir," he announced, holding the door open for Potter and

swinging it to behind him with a sharp bang, as a slight vent to his ruffled feelings.

Potter had crossed the room before he realized that he and Craige, who had risen at his entrance, were not alone. His angry frown gave way to a smile when the third man turned more fully toward him and he recognized Edward Rodgers.

"Hello, Ted, I'm glad you are here," he exclaimed as Craige pulled another chair for his guest before resuming his seat. Potter sat down heavily and tossed his hat and cane on the desk. "Say, Craige, what the deuce does this mean?" and unfolding a newspaper, which he had held tightly clenched in his left hand, he pointed to a column of news, under the heading:

Miss Susan Baird Wills Fortune to Niece

"It means what it says," explained Craige. "Miss Susan Baird left Kitty an heiress."

Potter's prominent pale blue eyes were opened to their widest extent. "C-c-cousin S-s-susan!" he stuttered. "That forlorn old pauper left a fortune! Why, Craige, I fully expected to be called on to pay her funeral expenses. You mean to tell me, in all earnestness, that Cousin Susan had any money—"

"She did not have 'any money,' she had a large

fortune," declared Craige, laughing outright at Potter's ludicrous expression of bewilderment.

"Then I am to understand that this newspaper is correct in its statements?" Potter asked.

"You are—" Craige leaned over and looked at the date on the newspaper. "You are a bit behindhand, Ben. That paper of yours is a day old."

"Well, I've only just seen it," Potter's tone had grown querulous. "I had to run on to New York night before last—the night of the inquest, to be exact, and Nina and I only got in this morning, having taken the midnight train. This paper was the first I opened when we reached home, and its account of Cousin Susan's will astounded me."

"It took our breath away also," admitted Craige. "Rodgers was with us when we found the will; in fact it was through his agency that it was found at all."

Potter swung around so hastily in his endeavor to face Rodgers that he knocked his cane off the desk.

"How'd you know there was a will?" he demanded. "Oh, never mind about the cane; let it stay on the floor."

"Rodgers had no knowledge of the will's existence any more than the rest of us," declared Craige before Rodgers, who had stooped to pick up Potter's cane, had a chance to answer the latter's question. "He happened to open a trap-door to a hiding place

in which lay directions, written by Susan Baird, telling us where to find her papers."

Potter stared at his companions in unbounded astonishment. It was some moments before he collected his wits sufficiently to ask a question.

"Where," he began, "and how, in the name of God, did Cousin Susan acquire her wealth?"

Craige shook a bewildered head. "I cannot answer that question," he admitted. "It is one that has puzzled me hourly since the finding of her will and the discovery of her investments."

"They are all genuine?"

"Absolutely; gilt edged, most of them." Again Craige shook his head. "Miss Susan showed rare judgment in her investments, rare even in an experienced man of business, and in a woman who posed as a pauper—good Lord!" He raised his hands and dropped them with an expressive gesture. "In all my legal experience the whole affair, her death, her wealth—is the most remarkable."

"Considering them together, does not her wealth suggest a motive for her death?" asked Rodgers, breaking his long silence.

"But who knew that she was wealthy?" demanded Potter. "Was ever a secret so well kept?" He stopped abruptly as a thought occurred to him and his expression altered. "How about Kitty? Was

she in the dark, too, or was she aware that her aunt owned a large fortune?"

"She was entirely ignorant of it." Rodgers spoke with marked emphasis, and Potter favored him with a heavy scowl. "Kitty Baird had no idea that her aunt was anything but the pauper she pretended to be. On that I'll stake my reputation."

Potter's scowl gave away to an expression of doubt.

"It's odd, in fact, it's damned odd!" he exploded. "Kitty lived with her aunt, lived alone with her. How could she help but know of her aunt's financial affairs?"

"Suppose you question Kitty," suggested Craige, with a swift glance at Rodger's lowering countenance. "The girl, in my opinion, knew absolutely nothing about her aunt's hoarded wealth—for it was hoarded, hoarded even from her, her only living relative."

"Hold on there, I'm a relative, also," objected Potter. "She and my father were second cousins. By the way," with a complete change of tone, "was there any mention of me in the will?"

"There was not." At Craige's curt reply Potter frowned again.

"So she left me out of it, did she?" He shrugged his shoulders with well-simulated indifference. "Did Cousin Susan name an executor and did she leave

her fortune to Kitty in trust, or give it to her outright?"

"She left it to Kitty without reservations," replied Craige. "Kitty applied to the Court to appoint me co-executor with herself, and the court has granted her request and permitted us to-day to take out letters of administration."

"Is that so." Potter reached for his hat and buttoned up his overcoat which he had kept on during the interview. "Do I understand, Ted, that you are seriously trying to solve the mystery of Cousin Susan's murder?"

"I am."

Potter rose. His usual genial manner was absent and also his ready smile.

"Has it occurred to you, Ted," he said, and his voice was rasping; "that the person to benefit by Cousin Susan's death is the one person known to have quarreled with her during the afternoon of the day in which she was murdered?"

"What d'ye mean?" Rodgers was on his feet, advancing toward the naturalist.

"I mean," Potter spoke with deliberation, his eyes not dropping before Rodgers' furious gaze. "I mean that Kitty first quarreled with her aunt and now most opportunely inherits her fortune—so that she can marry Leigh Wallace, who can't afford to marry a poor girl."

Rodgers' powerful grip on Potter's throat was loosened by Craige.

"Stop this quarreling!" commanded the lawyer. "Stop it, I say," and he shook Rodgers vehemently as he backed him away from Potter. "Go, Ben; I'll join you later."

Craige did not release his hold on Rodgers until Potter, still gasping from his encounter with the former, reeled out of the office.

"What has come over you, Rodgers?" he asked, letting go his hold so suddenly that Rodgers staggered backward. "Why did you fly at Potter in that manner?"

"The dirty blackguard!" Rodgers actually stammered in his rage. "Didn't you hear him? Why, he had the audacity to infer that because old Oscar overheard a wordy row between Kitty and her aunt, that Kitty killed the old lady and so inherited her fortune—to marry—" he choked. "Why, damn it! There are a dozen men who would marry Kitty if she hadn't a cent in the world—I'm—" his face paled, "I'm one of them."

Craige looked at him with admiring approval. "I like your loyalty," he exclaimed. "As for Potter—" he struck his desk with his clenched fist. "Potter has grown insufferable. Matrimony doesn't appear to agree with him." He stepped back to his desk and picked up his brief case. When he turned again

to Rodgers, who stood waiting by the door, the gravity of his manner struck the younger man. "There is no use blinding ourselves to the situation, Rodgers," he said. "It is up to us to solve the mystery of Susan Baird's death. If we don't," he paused, "Kitty may find herself in a most unpleasant predicament."

"The mystery is going to be solved—and quickly," Rodgers checked his hasty speech. "Are you on your way to the Court House, Mr. Craige?"

"Yes." Craige followed Rodgers through the outer office, pausing only long enough to be assisted into his overcoat by an attentive office boy, and joined him at the elevator. "Don't let Potter worry you, Rodgers; give him time to cool off. I imagine the news that Susan Baird was a wealthy woman, and that she never left him a red cent is responsible for his irritability. You know Ben is rather inclined to love money."

"Hm, yes. I can well believe that he is blood-kin in that respect to Miss Susan Baird," and Rodgers, his temper somewhat restored, waved a friendly hand to Craige as they left the elevator and went their several ways.

Once in the street Rodgers moved with dragging footsteps toward his car, his thought elsewhere. Suddenly he became conscious that, as deliberately as he walked, some one just ahead of him was mov-

ing even more slowly. Stepping to one side, he moved forward at a more rapid gait and was about to pass the limping figure when a hand touched his arm and looking down he found old Oscar by his side.

"I'se sorry, Sah, I couldn't get out o' your way," he said apologetically. "This hyar rheumatics am mighty bad dis mawnin', Mister Rodgers."

"That is too bad, Oscar." Rodgers, observing the old man's weary air, spoke with impulsive sympathy. "You are pretty far from home."

"Yessir. I started to do an errand fo' Mandy, and then I stopped to see a parade, an' I jes' naturally has ter follow a band, an' hyar I be!" The old darky heaved a heavy sigh. "I 'spects a street cyar'll be along bimeby an' carry me over to Georgetown."

"Get in my car and I will take you to 'Rose Hill.' " At Rodgers' suggestion a pleased smile lighted Oscar's face and he showed his big white teeth to their fullest extent.

" 'Deed, Sah, that's mighty nice ob you'," he exclaimed, moving with greater speed to the curb. "I kin get in, thank yo' kindly."

It took Oscar a few minutes to get comfortably settled in the roadster, and it was with a sigh of genuine satisfaction that he leaned back and watched Rodgers start his engine. His smile, which had never quite departed since Rogers first suggested

taking him home, broadened expansively as they slipped through traffic and swung into a quieter side street.

"Yo' certainly kin drive, Mister Rodgers," he said, breaking the long silence. "I guess yo' can beat Major Wallace handlin' a cyar."

"Thanks for the compliment, Oscar," Rodgers laughed. "Major Wallace has a reputation as a speedster."

"Yessir," but Oscar looked a trifle bewildered, long words were not his strong point. "Major Wallace done taught Miss Kitty ter drive."

"Oh, has he?"

"Yessir." Oscar was oblivious of Rodgers' shortness of tone. "Dat's one o' the things Ole Miss cut up ructions 'bout. She did hate dat Major, an' she jes' laid Miss Kitty out fo' goin' wid him."

"Oh, come, Oscar, Miss Susan did not hate Major Wallace," objected Rodgers.

"She did, Sah, she did." Oscar's smile had disappeared and he spoke quickly. "An' she suttingly did 'spress her mind to Miss Kitty on Sunday."

Rodgers turned and scanned Oscar closely. The old darky looked the picture of honest respectability. His worn clothes were neatly brushed and patched. He sat with his battered hat cocked a trifle over one eye and his black face shone with the enjoyment of the unexpected treat of a ride in a fast roadster with

"one of the quality" as he termed Ted Rodgers in his own mind.

"Why did you tell Coroner Penfield that Miss Susan and her niece quarreled on Sunday?" Rodgers asked. The old man blinked at the unexpected question.

"'Cause he axed me, an' they did quarrel." Oscar's voice betrayed a strain of obstinacy. "'Tain't no harm tellin' de truf, is there, Mister Rodgers?"

"No, certainly not." Rodgers slowed down at a street crossing and in shifting gears failed to catch the sudden crafty look Oscar shot at him. It vanished in a second. "How is Miss Kitty this morning?"

"Tol'able well, thank yo'," Oscar replied. "Dr. McLean was over las' night an' he tole Mandy that he wanted Miss Kitty to leave town fo' a month; seemed to think she needed change. But Miss Kitty, she said 'no.'"

"Then she is not going away." Rodgers' satisfaction was unconcealed. "Is she at home, Oscar?" as he slowed up the car before the entrance to "Rose Hill."

Oscar shook his head. "No, Sah, she done gone fo' de day," he said, opening the door and clambering with some difficulty to the pavement. "Miss

Kitty said somethin' 'bout seein' Mrs. Parsons. She done call her up dis mawnin'."

"I thought Miss Kitty had resigned from her secretary work." Rodgers let his engine run and leaned over to speak to Oscar. "Has Mrs. Parsons been here?"

"No, Sah, not since Miss Susan's death." Oscar hesitated, looked up and down the empty street, then back over his shoulder. No one was within earshot. The old man took his hand from the car door and rested his weight on his cane. "I kinda 'spects they had a fight."

"They—?" Rodgers eyed him in deep surprise. "Miss Kitty and Mrs. Parsons?"

"No, Sah. Mrs. Parsons an' ole Miss Susan. Good mawnin', Sah," and Oscar stamped up the steps leading to "Rose Hill," deaf to Rodgers' repeated calls to return.

CHAPTER XI

I. O. U.

TED RODGERS shut off his engine, sprang from the car and in ten strides had gained the old negro's side.

"Stop a moment!" And at the stern command in his voice Oscar halted. "I am convinced that you know more of Miss Susan Baird's death than you have admitted, Oscar, and—" his voice deepened, "you are going to tell me the truth."

Oscar cast a frightened glance upward. Rodgers' determined expression was not one to encourage evasion.

"Suttenly, Sah, suttenly. Wha-what truf do yo' wish, Sah?" he stammered, politeness uppermost in spite of his confusion of mind.

Rodgers' gaze grew in intensity as he studied the old man. The latter's eyes had shifted from his interrogator to the mansion and his black face had become mottled grey in color. As the silence lengthened, Oscar's apprehension increased and his

fingers fumbled nervously with his cane. For the life of him he could think of nothing to say. The sound of Rodgers' voice came as so vast a relief that at first he failed to take in what he was saying.

"You testified at the inquest, Oscar," Rodgers stated slowly, "that after serving a midday dinner on Sunday you left 'Rose Hill.' But you did not tell Coroner Penfield that you returned here on Sunday night—"

"I didn't, Sah—fo' Gawd, I didn't!" Oscar raised a trembling hand. "I only jes' passed along the street down yonder—"

"And what did you see?" demanded Rodgers, his eyes sparkling. His chance shot in the dark had told.

Oscar's answer was slow in coming. Moving closer to Rodgers, he laid one shaking hand, knotted from rheumatism, on his shoulder. The gesture, half involuntary, held something pathetic in its mute appeal.

"Massa," he began, and his voice grew wistful. "Whose side is yo' on? Is yo' fo' de police o' fo' Miss Kitty?"

Rodgers whitened as he met the old man's direct gaze. At last there was no shifting in Oscar's eyes. Man to man they faced each other—master and servant—each dominated with one desire: to serve one woman.

"I would give my life for Miss Kitty," Rodgers' deep voice carried conviction.

"An' yo' won't let no harm come to her?"

"No." The reply rang out clearly. Oscar's harrassed expression altered.

"Gawd bless yo', Sah!" He touched Rogers' hand reverently. "Ole Mandy an' me, we's needed help de worst way. Hadn't nowhar to turn; now—" he drew a long breath of relief. "Now yo' kin find Miss Kitty's red coat—"

"Miss Kitty's red coat?" echoed Rodgers, staring in astonishment at Oscar. "What in the world—"

"Yessir." Oscar blinked rapidly. "Yo' 'member dat dar coat Miss Kitty was so fond o' wearin'?—I heard yo' an' she argyfying 'bout it bein' pink 'stead o' red."

"I know the one you mean," replied Rodgers impatiently. "Well, what about it?"

"It's done gone!" Oscar raised his hand and dropped it in a gesture indicative of despair. "An', Mister Rodgers, we's got ter find dat ar coat fo' de police."

Rodgers stared at him for a full moment. There was no doubting Oscar's sincerity. His face was beaded in perspiration and his eyes, twice their normal size, were alight with earnest appeal.

"Please, Sah, don't ax me no mo' questions," he

pleaded. "Jes' find dat coat an' we'll know who killed ole Miss."

"Upon my word!" Rodgers shook a bewildered head. "What are you driving at, Oscar?"

"Find dat coat, Sah, an' then yo'll know all. 'Deed, Massa, I ain't lyin'." Oscar's voice shook with feeling. "Please, Sah, do as I ax. It's fo' Miss Kitty."

"Very well." Rodgers came to a sudden decision. "I'll do my best to aid Miss Kitty, even if I do it blindfolded. But, see here, Oscar, wouldn't it be simpler to ask Miss Kitty for her coat?"

"She mustn't know nawthin'!" Oscar spoke in genuine alarm. "She—she ain't had it fo' mos' some time—" His lips trembled a bit and he touched them with the tips of his fingers. "The coat ain't with none o' her clothes, 'cause I'se searched the house, Massa, an' Miss Kitty'll be everlastin' grateful to yo'. But—" his voice dropped to a husky whisper—"yo' git it befo' de police does."

Engrossed in their conversation, Rodgers had failed to note that Oscar had gradually edged his way to the top step. With an agility which took Rodgers completely by surprise the old negro whisked down the walk which skirted the mansion and disappeared from sight.

With an oath Rodgers pursued him down the walk, only to reach the side door and have it

slammed in his face. Repeated knocking brought no response, and after circling the mansion in the hope of finding an entrance, if not a glimpse of Oscar, he finally returned to his car and started for Washington much perturbed in mind.

On reaching Washington, Rodgers ran the car toward Pennsylvania Avenue, stopping en route to purchase a can of Mobiloil. It did not take him long to drive to a garage in an alley to the south of the Avenue. At his hail the owner of the small shop came out.

"How'dy, Mr. Rodgers," he exclaimed, touching his soiled cap. "How's the car going?"

"All right, but I want the oil drained out, Sam," handing, as he spoke, the can of Mobiloil to the mechanic. "How is business?"

"Oh, so so." Sam glanced about the wide alley. "Pull up to this side, Sir; I can get at the car better here."

Leaving the car, after he had complied with Sam's request, Rodgers stood watching him for a few minutes, but his thought would stray back to Kitty Baird and he lost interest in both the car and the mechanic. Lighting a cigarette, he strolled down the alley to where it opened into Pennsylvania Avenue. The sight of hurrying pedestrians and swift-moving vehicles proved only a brief diversion as his

mind again returned to Kitty and the unsolved problem of her aunt's mysterious death.

Oscar's conduct was a puzzle which he wanted time to think out. That the old man knew more of the circumstances of Miss Susan Baird's death than he was willing to divulge was self-evident. Rodgers was thoroughly convinced that Oscar was devoted to Kitty. What then, did he mean to infer by saying that he, Rodgers, must find Kitty's red coat before the police secured it? In what possible way was the coat connected with Miss Baird's death?

The blare of a motor horn almost in his ear caused Rodgers to jump to one side as an army truck drove out of the valley and turned into Pennsylvania Avenue. Not having time to look where he was going, Rodgers collided with a dummy figure placed in front of a second-hand clothes store. As Rodgers picked up the figure he found that its wax face had come in contact with the pavement and was decidedly damaged. With an impatient sigh he entered the store and was met by the proprietor.

"I knocked over your dummy," he explained, drawing out his leather wallet. "It got a bit damaged. How much—?" and he opened a roll of Treasury bills.

"Wait; I'll go see the dummy first," and the proprietor bustled out of the shop.

As Rodgers turned to accompany him, his eyes

fell upon a red coat lying on the counter. He had the faculty of carrying a color in his mind's eye, also of noticing minute details. The coat looked like Kitty's—with a single stride he was at the counter—the coat *was* Kitty's. It was a stylishly cut garment, of a rough finish cloth, with large patch pockets and a scarflike collar with fringe on the ends. To make assurance doubly sure Rodgers examined the black and gold buttons of Japanese handiwork. He had admired them too often to be mistaken. How came Kitty's coat in that store? A voice at his elbow caused him to wheel about.

"The face is kinda mussed up," announced the proprietor. "Five dollars will cover it."

"Five dollars!" fumed Rodgers, then paused. "Oh, all right—" handing him the money. "How much is this coat?"

"Twenty dollars." The proprietor had caught sight of Rodgers' generous roll of greenbacks. "It's a nice coat; good as new, 'cept for the torn lining and a few faded spots. It's just what any lady would want. She could reline—"

"I'll take it," cut in Rodgers and the proprietor accepted his money with a wry face. Why had he not asked more? It was not often that so biddable a purchaser wandered into his shop. "By the way," Rodgers paused in the doorway. "How long have you had this coat?"

"Two—no, three days." The proprietor paused to consider. "The woman came early in the morning and somehow the coat got misplaced in my stock. I was putting it in the window on display just as you arrived."

"Was the woman known to you?" asked Rogers. Both men were on the sidewalk by that time.

"Not she—never laid eyes on her before and wouldn't know her again if I was to see her." The proprietor was in a happy mood; not often had he taken in twenty-five dollars so easily. "Well, I hope your lady likes the coat. So-long," and he nodded affably, as Rodgers turned into the alley.

There was still five minutes' work to be done on the car and Rodgers spent them in hurrying Sam into completing the job without further waste of time, and it was with a feeling of satisfaction that he laid the coat on the seat and took his place behind the steering wheel. He had to slow up for traffic as he started out of the alley into Pennsylvania Avenue. A hail close at hand caused him to look around and he recognized the proprietor of the second-hand clothes store approaching.

"Hey! Just a minute," called the latter, and Rodgers pulled up at the curb and waited for him. "Say, mister, my wife fancies that coat, so if you don't mind I'll return you the twenty dollars," and he held out the money.

Rodgers eyed him in astonishment. "I prefer to keep the coat," he said. "Sorry I can't oblige you."

"But, see here," the man protested. "I'll give you two extra dollars. Come now, that's fair; twenty-two dollars. Money don't often turn over in your plans quite so fast, does it?" with a faint leer. "Here're the extra dollars."

"Thanks, but I don't want them," dryly.

"Oh!" The proprietor looked blank. "'Spose we make it twenty-five?"

"Nothing doing."

"How about thirty dollars?" persisted the man. "Oh, I'm no piker," observing Rodgers' expression. "When I want a thing I am willing to pay for it."

"And just why do you want this coat so particularly?" asked Rodgers, his suspicion aroused.

"I told you my wife wants that coat."

"Well, she can't have it." Rodgers released the clutch and the car shot down the Avenue, leaving the dealer in second-hand clothes standing with month agape, gesticulating wildly after him.

It was but a short distance to the Bachelor where he had an apartment, and Rodgers paid small regard to traffic regulations until he reached there. He wasted some valuable moments in finding parking space near the building and he was in no amiable frame of mind when he finally hurried through the swing door of the front entrance. The elevator

boy was nowhere visible and Rodgers collected his letters from his mail box; then, tucking the red coat under his arm, he went over to the staircase and mounted it two steps at a time until he reached the third floor. As he turned his latch-key and threw open the door of his apartment he heard his name called and whirled around. Ben Potter was walking toward him from the direction of the elevator shaft.

"Glad I caught you, Ted," he remarked, ignoring Rodgers' curt manner. Not waiting for an invitation, he stepped into the apartment and walked through the short hall into the large room which served Rodgers as a combination living and dining room. "I came to apologize for my surly behavior in Craige's office this morning, old man."

"Your apology is due to Miss Baird rather than to me," replied Rodgers stiffly.

"I spoke in haste—without thought," Potter admitted amiably. "Let's drop the matter, Ted. Can you dine with us to-night? I'll get Kitty to come also."

"I have an engagement to-night, thanks."

Potter's florid complexion turned a warmer tint and he averted his gaze so that Rodgers might not detect the sudden rage which his eyes betrayed.

"Sorry; but you'll come some other time, per-

haps," he mumbled. "Nina's greatly interested in hearing of all that you have done for Kitty."

"I—done for her?" Rodgers turned and eyed his companion sharply. Potter had perched himself on the end of the lounge with the evident intention of remaining, and was leisurely rolling a cigarette.

"Sure—you have accomplished a great deal for Kitty," Potter affirmed with emphasis. "You found the will which gave her a fortune. To put it poetically, the beggar maid is now an heiress and a prey to fortune hunters."

Rodgers' eyes blazed. "Your remarks are offensive," he exclaimed.

Potter straightened up. "Are you trying to fasten a quarrel on me?" he demanded hotly.

"I intend to make you speak more respectfully of Miss Baird," retorted Rodgers, his anger at white heat. "If that means a fight—well, I'm ready," and he tossed the red coat on the nearest chair to have his hands free.

Potter's big frame relaxed against the cushioned back of the lounge as he forced a laugh. "You are too damned quick to take offense," he protested. "Why, Kitty's my cousin. I'd be the first to take her part."

"And yet you insinuate—"

"Nothing," with a patience meant to exasperate. "What are you doing with Kitty's red coat?"

Rodgers met the unexpected question with unmoved countenance.

"You are mistaken," he said. "It is not Miss Baird's coat."

"It isn't?" Potter's rising inflection expressed doubt. "Let me see it?" And he reached forward a grasping hand.

With a quick movement Rodgers pulled the coat beyond Potter's reach. The next second he was staggering backward from a crashing blow delivered as Potter, who had gathered himself for a spring, swung forward upon his feet. Rage at the treacherous attack was a stimulant to Rodgers and he met Potter's second onslaught with a swift right-hander. The scientist was no easy antagonist and for the moment he had the better of the rough and tumble fight; then as the younger man got his second wind he gave back and Rodgers pinned him against the wall.

"You yellow dog!" Rodgers half sobbed the words in his rage as he shifted his grip to the man's throat.

The movement gave Potter his opportunity. Wrenching his right hand free he jerked a revolver from his coat pocket and brought the butt against Rodgers' temple with stunning force. Rodgers

sagged backward, then regained his balance as Potter's revolver again descended on his head. With a low moan he sank back, overturning a chair in his fall.

As Potter bent over the half-conscious man a resounding knock at the apartment door caused him to start upright. One hasty glance about the room showed him that the window overlooking the fire-escape was open. Potter's eyes sought the red coat. It lay on the floor, half hidden under Rodgers. Stooping over, he seized one of the sleeves and tugged at it.

The action aroused Rodgers from his stupor and with such strength as remained he grasped the sleeve also. It was an unequal tug-of-war. Potter's cry of triumph was drowned by repeated knocking on the door and the sound of raised voices demanding admittance. Not daring to remain longer, he released his hold on the coat sleeve and bolted through the window and down the fire-escape as an agile elevator boy climbed through the pantry window from an adjoining balcony and popped into the living room. He stopped aghast at sight of Rodgers, torn and bleeding, and the chaotic condition of the overturned furniture.

"My Lawd! What's been a-happenin'?" he gasped. "We heered ructions an' I got de police."

"Police!" The last word penetrated Rodgers'

reeling senses, and his eyes sought the red coat sleeve which he still grasped.

"Yes; they're at the do' now," as renewed pounding echoed through the place.

"Go and let them in," commanded Rodgers; then, as the boy dashed down the hall, he staggered to his feet over to the small dumb-waiter shaft which was used to carry garbage cans, milk bottles and packages to the apartment. But one idea was uppermost—the police must not get Kitty's red coat. He had just time to open the door and thrust the red coat down the chute and close the door again before two policemen appeared in the room. Stars were dancing before Rodgers' eyes and he brushed his hand across his forehead. He must think—think—Should he have Potter arrested? No, he would settle the score between them without police aid. His hands clenched at the thought and he straightened up in spite of the increasing sense of faintness which caused his knees to sag under him.

"What's happened?" demanded the foremost policeman. "Who attacked you?"

"A burglar, evidently," replied Rodgers, sinking down in the nearest chair. "I walked in on him. He went that way—" indicating the fire-escape.

"Chase down and see if you can catch him, Mike," ordered the first speaker. "I'll search the apartment for any clues. Here—" observing Rodg-

ers' half-fainting condition—"Good Lord, he's keeled over!"

An hour later Rodgers, his cuts treated by Dr. McLean, and finally left alone by a too-solicitous policeman, went down into the basement of the apartment house. He had no difficulty in locating the opening to the dumb-waiter shaft. Looking inside, he found it empty.

"What is it, Mr. Rodgers?" inquired the janitor's wife, a young colored girl who acted as laundress for the tenants.

"I'm looking for a red coat which I accidentally dropped down the chute, Cora," Rodgers explained.

"Mercy, Sir, I wish I'd known that was yours," she exclaimed. "It was on top of a pile of trash and was so raggety that I just put the whole business in the furnace."

Rodgers stared at her aghast, then, collecting his wits, he dashed by her and into the furnace room. The light from a hot fire half blinded him as he flung open the furnace door. Lying on the flagging close to the opening was a portion of the red coat—the rest was ashes. Rodgers jerked out the piece of red cloth, and flinging it on the cement floor, stamped out the smoldering flames. Paying no attention to Cora's lamentations, he hurried upstairs, the precious piece in his hand.

Once more in his apartment and with the door

safely locked, he dropped down on the lounge and regarded all that remained of the coat, as his thoughts returned to Oscar and his fervid request that he "find Miss Kitty's red coat." In what way was the red coat involved in the mystery of Miss Baird's death? Why had the dealer in second-hand clothes wished so ardently to buy it back? How had it gotten into his hands in the first place? Above all, why did Ben Potter wish to gain possession of it?

Rodgers' head swam with the effort to find an answer to the enigma. Sinking back against the cushions, he ran his hand over the piece of red cloth. It was the front breadth of the coat and its patch pocket that had remained intact.

As Rodgers' fingers strayed inside the pocket his thoughts turned to Kitty Baird—beautiful Kitty Baird—his best beloved. His restless fingers closed over a small wad of paper pressed deep in the coat pocket. A second later he had smoothed out the paper and, carrying it to the light, strove to read the writing upon it. A whistle escaped him.

"An 'I.O.U.,'" he exclaimed. "Devil take it, the signature's undeciperable!"

CHAPTER XII

A WORD OF WARNING

KITTY BAIRD regarded the butler with astonishment.

"Mrs. Parsons is not at home," she repeated. "Why, Oscar brought me a telephone message from her asking me to be here at noon and to lunch with her." She consulted her watch. "Are you quite certain that she is not in, James?"

"Quite, Miss Kitty." The butler's solemnity of manner matched his severe black clothes, which fitted his somewhat spare form with the neatness of a glove. "Mrs. Parsons had forgotten a meeting of the Neighborhood House Committee, and she left word that she was very sorry to put you out. She said that she had no idea what time she would be back, and that you were not to wait for her."

"Oh!" The exclamation slipped from Kitty with some vigor. "Oh, very well, James," with a quick change of tone. "Please tell Mrs. Parsons that I called. Good morning."

"Good morning, Miss Kitty." And James re-

treated inside the vestibule and closed the front door. As he went through the hallway, intent on reaching the servants' dining room by the shortest possible route, he failed to see Mrs. Parsons standing in the folds of the portières before the entrance to the small reception room, which, with the large dining room, was on the ground floor of her English basement house.

From her vantage point, Mrs. Parsons had overheard Kitty's conversation with her butler. Slipping her front door key, with which she had gained entrance some moments before, unknown to James, into her gold mesh bag, she hurried to the small window which overlooked the street. Taking care not to be seen by passers-by, Mrs. Parsons watched Kitty standing by the curb, apparently in doubt as to whether to cross the street or not.

Kitty, in fact, was debating where she should lunch. Time hung heavy on her hands, and the thought of the great empty house in Georgetown sent a shiver down her spine. Neither Mandy nor Oscar were enlivening company at the best of times, and since her aunt's death—Kitty shivered again. Oscar's morbid relish of everything pertaining to the tragedy, his incessant harping on the subject, had worked upon Kitty's nerves, and except for her appreciation of his many years of devoted ser-

vice, she would have paid him several months' wages in advance and let him go.

Mandy, since the day of the discovery of Miss Susan Baird's dead body, had moved over to "Rose Hill," bag and baggage, and Kitty had been grateful for her watchful care. Unlike her husband, Mandy was not given to talking and she had seen to it that Kitty had every attention, and in her way had done much to shelter her from inquisitive callers. Mandy looked upon the telephone as the invention of the Evil One, and nothing would induce her to answer it, so that to Oscar had fallen the task of keeping reporters away. His loquaciousness had, however, been checked by a stringent command from Mr. Craige to refer all newspaper men to him or to the police. The order had been emphasized with a hint that, if not carried out, Oscar would be parted from what promised to be a lucrative pension. Oscar had obeyed the order with much grumbling, but his complaints were carefully confided to his wife alone and fell on unsympathetic ears.

"Go 'long, nigger; don't bother yo' betters," she had responded. "Ef yo' ain't careful, Miss Kitty'll bounce us both. An' then whar'll we be?"

Kitty looked at her watch again. She had ample time to walk down to the Allies' Inn for luncheon and she would feel better for the exercise. Already

the sunshine and fresh air had braced her up. Her decision made, she waved away a taxi-driver hovering near the curb with a watchful eye on her, and, turning, started down the street. She was conscious of a man passing her at a rapid walk, but with her head slightly bent and her thoughts elsewhere, she did not glance up. The man ran up the three steps leading to Mrs. Parsons' front door, stopped, turned around and looked at her. The next second Kitty heard her name called by a familiar voice.

"What luck!" exclaimed Leigh Wallace, as she waited for him to approach. "Where are you going, Kitty?"

"To the Allies' Inn for luncheon," she replied. "Mrs. Parsons is out, Leigh; I've just been there."

"Oh, ah!" Wallace twirled his swagger stick with such energy that it almost slipped from his grasp. "In that case, Kitty, lunch with me at the Shoreham? Don't say you won't," as she shook her head. "I must talk to you—by yourself. Don't refuse, Kitty, don't."

Kitty looked at him steadily. "We can talk as we walk along," she said quietly. "Come." And her decided tone left Wallace nothing to do but match his footstep to hers as she sauntered along.

From her sheltered nook in the window Mrs. Parsons saw Major Wallace's rapid approach to her front door, observed his belated recognition of

Kitty, heard his hail, and watched their leisurely walk down the street. An odd smile crossed her lips as she dropped the window curtain into place and went quietly to her bedroom.

"Francise," she said, as her confidential maid rose on her entrance and laid down some sewing, "tell James that I will lunch alone to-day. Major Wallace is unexpectedly detained and has cancelled his engagement with me."

Kitty found Major Wallace a taciturn companion, and her efforts at conversation elicited only absent-minded, monosyllabic replies as they walked slowly down Connecticut Avenue. It was not until they reached H Street that Wallace awoke from his abstraction.

"The Shoreham is down this way," he expostulated as Kitty continued walking straight ahead. "You must lunch with me, Kitty, you promised."

"I did nothing of the sort," she retorted. "You said that you wished to talk to me and you have had every opportunity to do so. Instead of which you have been silent to the verge of rudeness. Frankly," and her voice was decidedly chilly, "you owe me an explanation—"

"That is just it," he broke in. "Why have you avoided me?"

"I? Avoided you?" The scorn in Kitty's voice

caused him to color warmly. "I have done nothing of the sort."

"You sent word that you 'begged to be excused' when I called to see you," Wallace reminded her bitterly.

"The words were of Oscar's choosing, not mine," she explained. "You came the night of the inquest, and by Dr. McLean's orders I denied myself to all callers—"

"But you saw Ted Rodgers?"

"Well, why not?" Her color deepened, but her eyes did not fall before his angry gaze. "It is not your right to dictate to me about anything. And besides," not giving him a chance to interrupt her, "you have had ample time to call since then."

"I've been ill—oh, hang it!" as a hurrying pedestrian collided against him. "We can't talk here. "There's no fun in being jostled about by idiots!"—casting a vindictive glance at the offender, who had just made the street car he had been running to catch.

Kitty eyed Wallace sharply. Never before had she known him so upset in speech and manner. As she observed the careworn lines in his face and the mute appeal in his deep-set eyes, her anger cooled.

"I will lunch with you, Leigh," she said. "But why make such a point of it?"

What answer Wallace would have made remained

unspoken, as a mutual acquaintance swooped down upon them and, utterly ignoring their lack of cordiality, insisted upon accompanying them to the Shoreham. Once inside the hotel restaurant, Wallace lost no time in securing a table in a secluded corner and an attentive waiter took his order for luncheon.

"There, that's done," and Wallace, with a sigh of satisfaction, laid down the menu card and contemplated Kitty with admiration but thinly veiled. Her mourning was extremely becoming to her blonde beauty. "Is this story true that I hear, Kitty, that your aunt has left you a fortune?"

Kitty considered him in silence. The question had been asked so often by friends and acquaintances that it had lost its novelty; coming from him it surprised her.

"Mr. Craige assures me that I am no longer a pauper," she answered, and her tone was dry.

Wallace flushed. "The papers said that you were wealthy, very wealthy," he persisted.

"It depends on how you compute wealth," she said. "And how much faith you put in newspapers." A faint mocking smile touched her lips and vanished. "Why this interest in my fortune, Leigh?"

"Because," he spoke with unconcealed bitterness,

"it puts another barrier between us. Your aunt's hatred, and now this, this—"

"Please stop," Kitty raised her hand slightly. "Why keep up the farce longer?"

"Farce?"

"Flirtation, if you like it better," she sighed involuntarily. "Just an idle flirtation."

"Idle nothing! You'd have married me if you hadn't met Ted Rodgers," he blurted out.

"Stop!" Her tone, though low, was imperative. "Here is luncheon. Suppose we discuss another topic. When does Nina Potter return from New York?"

"I have no idea," shortly. "Have a muffin, do?" and he extended the bread plate toward her, then relapsed into abstracted silence.

Kitty's healthy young appetite, sharpened by her walk, did full justice to the luncheon, and, not feeling inclined for conversation, she was content to watch the groups of people seated at near-by tables. One pair, obviously a bride and groom, especially attracted her and she turned for another look at them as they left the restaurant. When she faced around toward Wallace again, she saw their waiter slip a note into his hand. It was deftly done and only Kitty's keen eyes detected the act. Wallace, his face devoid of expression, laid the lunch check and a bank note on the silver salver.

"Never mind the change," he said to the waiter, and rising helped Kitty put on her coat and adjust her furs. "I am sorry my car is in the paint shop, but we will get a taxi at the door."

"We'll do nothing of the sort," objected Kitty. "I don't propose to put you to all that trouble, Leigh."

Without answering, Wallace led the way down the corridor to the H Street entrance. "Call a taxi," he directed the doorman, then turned to Kitty. "Don't scold," he begged. "I am going to Fort Myer and it will not take me out of my way to leave you at 'Rose Hill.' Here's the car—" and before Kitty could protest further, she was bundled inside the taxi. Wallace gave a few hurried directions to the chauffeur and then sprang in beside her.

The chauffeur was evidently a novice for he started his car with such a jerk that Kitty was half thrown from her seat. With a muttered word which strongly resembled a curse, Wallace picked up her bag and muff and laid them in her lap.

"The —— fool!" His face was red with anger. "Sorry, Kitty, I have no use for incompetents."

Kitty watched him in wondering silence. In place of a sunny temperament she found uncontrolled irritability; instead of the steady gaze she was familiar with, she became aware of ever shifting eyes. What had changed her cheery companion of

the past into the nervous, unhappy man by her side?

Kitty sighed involuntarily. She had met Leigh Wallace four months before, shortly after he was admitted as a patient at Walter Reed Hospital, at a "birthday party" for the Walter Reed boys at the Theodorus Bailey Myers Mason House, and they had become great friends. Her aunt's dislike was so general, so far as her friends were concerned, that Kitty had not taken seriously her objections to the gay and handsome army officer. When she finally realized that Miss Susan Baird had conceived what appeared to be an actual hatred of Leigh Wallace, Kitty had tried to reason with her, but to no avail. When Miss Susan Baird had once acquired an idea, the Rock of Gibraltar was as jelly to her.

Kitty had inherited some of the Baird obstinacy, and it was that trait more than anything else which had fanned her liking into a violent flirtation with Wallace. She considered her aunt unjust in her treatment of him and resented her incivility. Her sympathies aroused, she had almost persuaded herself that she was in love with him, and then—Kitty's face flamed at the recollection. Then she had met Edward Rodgers.

Time had had no place in the development of their friendship. He had been drawn to her with the same irresistible attraction which the North Pole has for the magnetic needle. No word of love had

ever passed his lips, but his eyes—they had pleaded his suit more eloquently than any words.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Kitty was actually startled when the taxi stopped in front of "Rose Hill."

"Won't you come in?" she asked, as Wallace helped her out of the car.

"No, thanks, I haven't time." Wallace looked up at the fine old mansion and hesitated a moment. "I'll try and get in to-night or to-morrow. Say, Kitty, why don't you go to a hotel?"

"Do what?" Kitty's astonishment was obvious.

"Close up your house," with hurried emphasis. "You ought not to live there alone. What is Craige thinking of to let you do it?"

"But I am not alone," she pointed out. "Oscar and Mandy are living with me now. Besides—" it was her turn to hesitate. "The police wish the house kept open."

"They do, eh?" Wallace turned and scowled at the mansion. "Have you heard anything, Kitty—any new theories about your aunt's death?"

She shook her head. "I only know those published in the newspapers," she answered. "The police do not make a confidante of me. Won't you change your mind, Leigh, and come into the house?"

"I really can't." Wallace walked with her up the

terraced steps to the front door and laid an impatient hand on the old-fashioned bell-pull.

"Don't ring!" exclaimed Kitty. "Both of the servants are out. I have my latch-key to the side door. Don't wait any longer, Leigh, if you are in a hurry."

"Sure you can get in?" Kitty nodded an affirmative. Wallace wavered a moment, glanced at the bunch of keys which Kitty produced from her muff, then cast a fleeting look at the walk which skirted the mansion. "Kitty," he stepped closer to her side, his hands fumbling awkwardly with his hat. "Did you and your aunt really quarrel about me on Sunday?"

Kitty stepped back as if shot. "What an egotistical question?" she stammered, with a brave attempt at a laugh. "On the contrary, Leigh, Aunt Susan and I had words over a matter of no importance; as was our habit. Good-by."

"Good-by—" Wallace echoed her words mechanically, and, without a further glance at her, ran down the steps.

Kitty watched the taxi and its solitary passenger disappear up Q Street before turning toward the brick walk which circled the house and led to the large garden in the rear. She dreaded entering the house alone. It was a feeling which she had not been able to conquer, and she had, on the few occasions when she had gone out, always arranged to

have one of the servants in the house upon her return. Mandy had asked for the afternoon off and Oscar, not being at home when Kitty left to go to Mrs. Parsons, had probably not gotten back in time to be told by Mandy before her departure that he was to await Kitty's return.

Kitty shook herself. It was not yet four o'clock in the afternoon. It was foolish to give way to nerves. But before turning into the walk, Kitty took one final look down the terraced steps, hoping for a sight of Mandy's substantial form or old Oscar's halting walk. Neither was visible. As her glance swept upward, she saw a piece of crumpled paper lying on the step just below her. Stooping over, she picked it up and, observing writing upon it, smoothed out the paper. She had read the few words it bore several times before she took in their meaning.

Leigh, you are watched.

Kitty turned the paper over. It was the one she had seen the waiter at the Shoreham slip surreptitiously into Leigh Wallace's hand. She recognized the delicate mauve shade of the paper—she also recognized the handwriting. Why had Mrs. Parsons written such a warning to Leigh Wallace?

With her ideas in a whirl Kitty walked slowly around the mansion and to the side door. It gave

entrance to the library. There was a perceptible pause before Kitty unlocked the door and entered the house. She had grown to loathe the library.

Mouchette, aroused from her slumber in front of the fireplace, came forward with many "mews" to greet her. Kitty fondled the cat affectionately before laying down her muff and fur piece on the nearest chair. Going over to the chimney, she poked the smoldering embers on the hearth into a feeble blaze and added some kindling wood.

She had a sense of chill in the room apart from its lack of heat. She could not dissociate her surroundings from the tragedy of Sunday. In her mind's eye she saw always her aunt's body lying inert in the throne-shaped chair and in memory she conjured up their last interview on that fatal Sunday afternoon. Her aunt had not spared her feelings. What was it that she had called her—an ingrate! And her last sentence still echoed in Kitty's ears:

"Mark my words, Kitty, if you don't conquer this infatuation for Leigh Wallace, it will not be you alone who will suffer. It will kill me."

As Kitty spread out her cold hands to the blaze her eyes again read the message written by Mrs. Parsons on the mauve-colored paper, which she still clutched in her fingers:

Leigh, you are watched.

CHAPTER XIII

BRIBERY

A RESOUNDING knock on the side door, through which she had entered the library a few minutes before, caused Kitty to start violently and her hand reached out instinctively to catch the mantel-piece to steady herself. For a second she rested her weight against it, then, controlling her nervousness, she thrust the mauve paper into the pocket of her coat and with reluctance moved over to the side door. Callers did not usually announce their presence in that manner. Miss Susan Baird had never permitted what she termed "familiarity," and no friend, no matter what the degree of intimacy, was ever admitted except through the front door. Her dominating character had forced respect for her peculiarities, and Kitty could recall no one, except herself, who had ever cared to cross her aunt in any particular.

With her hand on the door-knob, Kitty hesitated. She was alone in the house and in no mood for visitors. Squaring her shoulders, she pulled the door partly open. Inspector Mitchell was standing on the top step of the small "stoop" which led to the brick walk.

"Good afternoon, Miss Baird," he said, bowing affably. "Can you spare me a few minutes of your time?"

"Why, certainly." Kitty concealed her vexation. The inspector was the last person she had expected to encounter. "Won't you come in?" and she opened the door to a wider extent. Not waiting for him to remove his overcoat, she hurried across the library and picking up a log from the wood basket by the hearth she stirred the fire to a brighter blaze. On facing about, she found the inspector standing in front of the side door and regarding it with fixed attention.

"This door does not seem exactly in keeping with this house," he said, as Kitty approached him. "I've never seen a finer example of Colonial architecture, but this—" laying his hand on the upper section of the door—"this resembles a Dutch door."

"That is exactly what it is, or rather, what Aunt Susan had it converted into," Kitty explained. "Aunt Susan had a bad attack of inflammatory rheumatism about fifteen years ago; she could not

leave the house and sat chiefly in this room. She was devoted to her garden and had this side door cut in half so that she could see outside without having to open the entire door."

"And this panel in the upper half of the door?" Mitchell laid his hand on it as he spoke. "Does it open?"

"Yes, it is a sliding panel." Kitty stifled a yawn. "The builder's idea of ornamentation, I presume—a door within a door." She smiled. "And rusty with disuse. Oscar has an objection to cleaning brass, or anything in fact that requires 'elbow grease.'"

"The *latch* is discolored," Mitchell amended. With a quick motion of his hand he released the catch and pushed the panel backward. "But there is no sign of rust in the hinges. Judging from the way this panel moves, Miss Baird, it is well oiled. See for yourself."

Kitty glanced at him in surprise before moving the panel back and forth. Inspector Mitchell was right; it moved with ease and totally without noise. When pushed to the farthest, the panel left an opening about eight inches square.

"What do you think of that, Miss Baird?" inquired Mitchell.

"I'm sure I don't know." Kitty's eyebrows drew together in a perplexed frown. "We never touched

that panel; never had occasion to use it. This," laying her hand on the upper part of the Dutch door, "we frequently kept open in the summer as we get the southwestern breeze through it. We never use this door as a means of exit except to go into the garden."

"You entered by it to-day upon your return," Mitchell remarked and Kitty favored him with a blank stare.

"Were you watching me?" she asked with a touch of coldness.

"I was waiting in the summer house," Mitchell explained, ignoring her manner. "No one answered the front bell and, as I wished very much to see you, I killed time by strolling through the garden. Then you don't generally use this entrance to the house?"

"No." Kitty regarded him inquiringly, puzzled by his persistent questions on a trivial subject. "Only since Aunt Susan's death. The lock on this door is modern and the key a reasonable size to carry in my hand bag. Perhaps you recall the key to the front door?" she could not restrain a smile. "It is old-fashioned—"

Mitchell nodded. "I recollect its size," he remarked dryly. "I found it in the key-hole of the front door on Monday morning, just before we discovered your aunt lying dead in this room. Haven't any idea how the key got there then, have you?"

Kitty turned pale. "At the coroner's inquest I told all that I know of the circumstances surrounding my aunt's death." She faced him quickly. "Have *you* made no discoveries bearing on the crime?"

"Only those brought out at the inquest," he replied, with noncommital brevity. "Come, Miss Baird, suppose we talk over some of the aspects of the case. I won't detain you very long."

Taking her consent for granted, Inspector Mitchell wheeled forward an armchair and selected another for himself. Mouchette watched them both, then, rising stiffly, deserted her favorite spot near the hearth and perched herself in Kitty's lap, her loud purr testifying to her contentment as Kitty passed her hands over the soft gray fur. Kitty did not care to break the pause that followed. She was content to remain silent and await developments. Mitchell did not leave her long in doubt as to the direction his thoughts were tending.

"Mr. Craige tells me that you have inherited a pretty fortune," he began. "A very pretty fortune, to be exact. Now, your aunt, if you'll excuse my directness, lived in, eh," he hesitated, "say, genteel poverty." Kitty nodded somberly. Would people never stop harping on her suddenly acquired wealth? "Where did your aunt get this money she left to you?"

"I have no idea," she replied. "I am as ignorant on the subject as you are."

Mitchell eyed her intently. Was it candor which prompted the direct denial or duplicity? She appeared unconscious of his steady gaze, her attention apparently centered on the flickering fire, and her hands, clasped together, rested idly in her lap. Mitchell's profession had made him a close student of human nature and as he studied her face, partly turned from him, he concluded that Kitty did not lack strength of character and will power, whatever her faults might be.

Was her air of relaxation, of almost dumb inertia, a cloak to hide high-strung, quivering nerves? If he could but shake her composure, he might gain some key to the mystery of her aunt's murder. Mitchell cleared his throat as he unobtrusively hitched his chair around to obtain a more favorable angle from which to gauge her expression.

"Had your aunt a large correspondence?" he asked.

Kitty shook her head. "Aunt Susan abominated letter-writing," she replied. "My godfather, Mr. Craige, attended to her few business correspondents and I answered any invitations that came to us."

"Had you any relations living outside of Washington?" he asked.

"A few very distant cousins." She shrugged her

shoulders. "My aunt did not encourage intercourse with them."

"Their names, please?" Mitchell pulled out a pencil and notebook and thumbed its pages until he found a blank space.

"A. J. Beekman of Detroit." Kitty watched him in some amusement. "Then there was rather a large family of Smiths in Georgia—I'm sorry I can't be more definite. Aunt Susan, as I said before, never cultivated her relatives."

"Did she actively dislike them?"

Kitty straightened up and regarded him. "I don't catch your meaning?"

"My meaning is clear." Mitchell spoke slowly, deliberately. "Did your aunt actively dislike Major Leigh Wallace because of his relationship?"

"His relationship?" echoed Kitty in bewilderment. "He is no relation."

"I beg pardon," with a sarcastic smile. "I happen to know that Leigh Wallace is your cousin."

"Then your knowledge is greater than mine." Kitty curbed her quick temper with an effort and added more quietly, "Whoever told you that was misinformed."

"I think not." Mitchell consulted his notebook before continuing. "Colonel Marcus Holt of San Francisco, was your uncle, was he not?"

"Yes. My mother, Louise Holt, was his sister."

Kitty slipped her arms out of her coat which she had kept on for warmth. The fire was drawing nicely and for the first time she was conscious of the heat it generated. "What prompts your interest in old Colonel Holt? I assure you he died long before Aunt Susan." There was a touch of mockery in her voice and Mitchell smiled grimly.

"I am coming to my point," he said. "Holt's nephew is Major Leigh Wallace."

Kitty sat bolt upright with such suddenness that Mouchette nearly lost her balance. With an offended air, the cat jumped to the floor and crept under the nearest chair.

"What!" exclaimed Kitty. "Are you sure?"

"And therefore," went on Mitchell, paying no attention to her interruption. "Leigh Wallace must be a relation of yours."

"I suppose so," Kitty admitted thoughtfully. "But why had Leigh never told me that we are related? He has never spoken of being a nephew of Uncle Marcus."

"Nor of inheriting the old colonel's fortune?"

"Fortune?" Kitty looked blank. "Why, I have always understood that Major Wallace had only his pay. I never knew that he was wealthy."

"His fortune disappeared, the way fortunes have when dissipated away," Mitchell was watching her like a lynx, but her expression of friendly interest

conveyed that and nothing more. The mention of Leigh Wallace's name had not produced the result he had hoped for. Kitty's composure had not been shaken. Could it be that she was not in love with him, as rumor reported? Mitchell frowned. He was not making headway.

"Have you ever heard of the Holt will contest in San Francisco?" he asked, after a brief pause.

"Only in a general way. Aunt Susan spoke of it once or twice." Kitty settled back in her chair again. "She never evinced any particular interest in Uncle Marcus, and he on his part ignored our existence. To go back to ancient history—" Kitty's smile was a trifle mischievous; keeping Inspector Mitchell discussing harmless topics would prevent his harping upon her aunt's death, and perhaps would hasten his departure—"Uncle Marcus objected to mother marrying my father, and naturally Aunt Susan resented the fact that her brother was unwelcome to his wife's family."

"So she nursed a grudge against them, did she?"

"Oh, no; she simply had nothing to do with them."

"Then this money which your aunt left to you couldn't have been given to her by Colonel Holt in his lifetime?" asked Mitchell.

"Good gracious, *no*." Kitty's astonishment was

plain. "Aunt Susan's prejudices were stronger even than her—"

"Love of money?"

Kitty flushed hotly. "I do not care to have slurs cast upon my aunt," she said coldly. "She is not here to defend herself."

"Hold on, Miss Baird," Mitchell protested. "You must realize that your aunt hoarded this wealth which you inherited; otherwise she would have spoken to you or to some one about it. She—" Mitchell came to a full pause, then added impressively: "Your aunt was a miser."

Kitty's color deepened, but the denial which loyalty prompted remained unspoken. Her sense of justice told her that Inspector Mitchell had spoken truly. What other motive, except love of money, had induced her aunt to live in poverty when she had ample funds to enable her to enjoy every luxury which money could buy?

"Am I to conclude from your questions," she began, "that you connect my aunt's hidden wealth with her murder?"

"It seems a reasonable hypothesis," he replied. "Take the known facts about the murder—first, your aunt was alone in the house on Sunday afternoon—"

"Was she?"

"Do you know anything to the contrary?" quickly.

"No. But," she hesitated, "some one must have been inside the house as well as my aunt."

"And that some one—?"

"Murdered my aunt," locking him calmly in the eyes. "She never committed suicide."

Mitchell regarded her steadfastly. "Can you give me no hint of the identity of your aunt's caller?" he asked. "Think carefully, Miss Baird. Have you no suspicion who *might* have murdered your aunt?"

Kitty did not reply at once; instead her hand slipped inside her coat pocket and her fingers closed about the small slip of mauve colored paper tucked underneath her handkerchief, while the message it bore recurred to her: "Leigh, you are watched."

To what did Mrs. Parsons' warning allude? To what *could* it allude? And why did Inspector Mitchell invariably drag Leigh Wallace's name into their conversation? And what had inspired her aunt's hatred of Leigh? Could it have been fear? Fear of what—Death? Kitty shuddered, then pulled herself together. She must not let fancies run away with her.

"I know of no one who could have had a motive for killing poor Aunt Susan," she said. "It must have been the work of some one afflicted with homicidal tendencies."

"I'll stake my reputation that it was no maniac," declared Mitchell. "The crime was deliberately planned and by some one with nerves absolutely under control. Look at the manner in which the poison was administered—placed on one side of the knife-blade, so that the prussic acid only touched the piece of peach given to your aunt, and the murderer ate his half in perfect safety. It was neat, devilishly neat!"

"Have you found out where the peaches came from?" asked Kitty.

"No, worse luck." Mitchell frowned. "Very few fruit stores make deliveries on Sunday and those few deny sending any fruit here."

"How about the Italian fruit stands? Have you questioned the dealers?"

Mitchell smiled wryly. "Not many fruit dealers carry peaches at this season. Our operatives have been pretty thorough in their investigations." He paused before adding, "According to their reports no one, man, woman, or child, purchased peaches on Sunday last."

Kitty hesitated. "They may have come from a distance," she suggested. "By parcel post or express. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes, and we found that no package was left here by the express company or post office employees." Mitchell paused to replace his notebook and pencil in

his pocket. "No, Miss Baird, the murderer brought those peaches with him."

"It would seem so," agreed Kitty, thoughtfully.

"And it must have been some one who knew that your aunt liked peaches," went on Mitchell. "Were her tastes generally known among your friends?"

Kitty caught her breath sharply. The question recalled an incident forgotten in the rush of events. Leigh Wallace, on the few occasions when he had been invited to tea with them, had invariably preceded his visit with a basket of fruit, and—each basket had contained peaches!

"I suppose our friends knew that Aunt Susan liked peaches," she said. Her hesitation, slight as it was, was not lost on Mitchell. "I never gave the matter a thought."

"Indeed?" Mitchell did not try to conceal his unbelief. "Do you see much of Mr. Edward Rodgers?"

Kitty actually jumped at the abruptness of the question and its nature. "What earthly business is it of yours whether I see Mr. Rodgers or not?" she demanded indignantly.

"It is not my business." Mitchell smiled apologetically. "It just occurred to me that he might have mentioned the Holt will contest to you."

"To me?" in genuine surprise. "Why should he

speak about Uncle Marcus and the contest over his will?"

"Oh, I don't know," Mitchell whirled his hat about. "Mr. Rodgers was called in as a handwriting expert. It was one of his big cases, and I thought it likely he might have talked it over with you, seeing Colonel Holt was your uncle."

"I doubt if Mr. Rodgers knows that we were related. From what I have seen of Mr. Rodgers," her color rose as she spoke, "I judge he seldom discusses himself or his work."

"Perhaps not." Mitchell walked over to the side door and laid his hand on the knob. "I won't detain you any longer, Miss Baird. If you should think of any one who ever evinced any great interest in your aunt's fondness for peaches, just telephone me. Good afternoon."

Left to herself Kitty stepped up to the fireplace and taking out the piece of mauve-colored paper held it suspended over the flames. But her clutching fingers did not relax their grasp and finally she tucked the paper in the belt of her dress. She laughed mirthlessly as she walked across the library and felt about for a box of matches. Inspector Mitchell, whether he had attained the object of his call or not, had sown seeds of suspicion.

It had grown quite dark and the room, lighted

only by fire, was filled with shadows. Kitty passed a nervous hand over the table ornaments—the match-box which usually stood near the oil lamp had evidently been misplaced. She was about to look elsewhere when the sound of voices reached her.

"I'se done looked an' looked," she heard Oscar say. "An' I tell yo' ole Miss never left no such papers."

"Please, please keep up your search," a woman's voice pleaded. "Please, Oscar. I'll give you more than I promised—a hundred dollars more."

Kitty straightened up and stared about her. The voices sounded clearly in her ears, but surely she was alone in the library? Running over to the tea table, she felt about and snatched up the much-sought matches. The next instant she was back at the lamp and a second later the room was illuminated. She was its only occupant.

Where had the voices come from? As her eyes roved about the library she spied the "Dutch" door near where she was standing. The little panel in the upper half of the door had been left open and through it came faintly the sound of receding footsteps.

Throwing wide the door, Kitty stepped outside. In the gathering darkness no one was visible. She paused in thought, her troubled eyes trying to pierce

the gloom of the desolate garden and the empty pathway circling the mansion. The woman's voice still echoed in her ears—where, where had she heard its haunting quality before?

CHAPTER XIV

AND CORRUPTION

KITTY paused before her bureau and inspected herself in the mirror. It had been a relief to change from her street clothes to a dressing gown. She had spent nearly an hour lying on the couch in her bedroom trying to piece together the puzzling events of the afternoon. On reëntering the house she had gone at once to the servants' quarters; from there she had searched every room, even to the attic. To all appearances Oscar was not in the house. She had then waited in the library, hoping to catch him on his entrance, but evidently he had accompanied the unknown woman away from the house.

Kitty struck her hands together in impotent wrath at the thought. Why had she not realized immediately that the speakers were outside the house, and not wasted precious minutes trying to light the lamp in the library and thus given them time to slip away unseen!

Who was the woman? Vainly, Kitty tried to identify her voice. Strive as she did to recall where she had heard it before, it eluded her memory. Why should any woman bribe old Oscar to steal papers which had belonged to her aunt?

With a sigh of utter weariness, Kitty gave up the problem for the moment and continued her dressing. Twenty minutes later, her toilet completed, she stopped before the cheval glass and gave a final pat to her hair. At last, satisfied with her appearance, she hastened into the hall. As she descended the staircase, she heard the rattle of dishes in the dining room and the sound of the dumb-waiter creaking its way upward. With flying footsteps she covered the intervening space and crossed the hall to the pantry.

"Oscar!" she called. "I wish to speak to you at once. Come here."

But the person who stepped from the dining room into the pantry at her imperious summons was not Oscar.

"What yo' want, Miss Kitty?" asked Mandy.

"Oscar!" She repeated the old servant's name with ever growing impatience. "I must see him immediately."

"Laws, Miss Kitty, Oscar's on his way to Front Royal, Virginia, dis hyar minute," explained Mandy, in no wise hurrying her leisurely speech.

"On his way where?" gasped Kitty.

"To Front Royal." Mandy lifted her apron and produced from a voluminous pocket a much twisted telegram. "He done got dis hyar message to come at wandst 'cause his brother, the one dat owns a farm five miles from Front Royal, is a dyin'. See what dey done wrote," and she held out the telegram. Kitty read the typed lines with interest before handing the telegram back to Mandy.

"Why didn't you tell me of this?" she demanded. "Oscar had no business to leave without first speaking to me."

"Laws, Miss Kitty, yo' warn't in de house an' we didn't know when yo' 'spected to be back," Mandy explained. "Oscar had to catch the three o'clock train to get there to-night."

"The three o'clock train," Kitty repeated. "The three o'clock train *this afternoon.*"

"Yes, Miss Kitty."

"But—" Kitty passed a bewildered hand across her forehead. "Oscar was here at five o'clock—here at this house."

"Here?" Mandy's eyes opened, showing the whites more clearly. "What yo' talkin' 'bout, Miss Kitty?"

"Oscar was here this afternoon at five o'clock," Kitty stated, speaking more deliberately so as to make certain that Mandy understood what she said.

"I overheard him talking to a woman just outside the library door."

"Yo' did!" Mandy's uplifted voice as well as her expression registered complete astonishment. "Did yo' *see* him?"

"No. I tell you I overheard him talking to a woman." Kitty's temper was gaining the upper hand, and she spoke with warmth. "I know Oscar's voice, Mandy."

"Yes, Miss Kitty," but the old colored woman still looked unconvinced. "Dar's a heap o' niggers talks jes' like Oscar. Is yo' sure it warn't dat worthless 'Rastus from nex' do'?"

"I know it was not 'Rastus," declared Kitty, with emphasis. "Besides, the woman, in speaking to Oscar, addressed him by name."

"She did?" Mandy fell back a step and stared at Kitty. "Oh, go 'way, Miss Kitty, yo' been dreamin'—why, 'twarn't possible. I went to de depot with Oscar my own self an' saw Oscar get on dat train, an' it done pull out fo' Front Royal at three o'clock this afternoon."

It was Kitty's turn to stare at Mandy. The old woman's beady black eyes did not shift their gaze. A full minute passed before Kitty broke the silence.

"When did you return, Mandy?" she asked.

"'Bout six or a few minutes after," Mandy said. "I come upstairs an' listened to hear ef yo' was in

de house. I didn't hear nuffin' an' didn't see no light, so I went back to de kitchen to get dinner. I s'posed yo' hadn't come in."

"I was lying down—"

Mandy's worried expression changed to one of relief and she did not permit Kitty to finish her sentence.

"Dar now, I 'spects yo' jes' drap off to sleep an' dreamed 'bout Oscar bein' hyar," she exclaimed. "Dat was it, Honey, dat was it!"

"Oh, was that it?" Kitty's voice lacked heartiness. "All right, Mandy. Serve dinner when it is ready."

"Yes, Miss Kitty; it won't be a minute now. I'se got a real tasty chicken a broilin'. Jes' go set down, chile; trust ole Mandy to look after yo'." And she gave the girl's arm a friendly squeeze as Kitty passed her to go into the dining room.

Kitty did not sit down at once. Her thoughts were in a turmoil as she paced up and down the room. Was Mandy right? Had she dreamed overhearing an unknown woman offer Oscar a bribe to steal papers which had belonged to her aunt? Her aimless footsteps carried her into the library and to the Dutch door. The small panel stood open. Kitty's eyes strayed from it to the telephone. On impulse she crossed to the instrument and took up the telephone directory. It took her but a moment

to find the number she wished, then she paused. Should she call Edward Rodgers or her cousin, Ben Potter?

She had seen or heard nothing from either Ben or his wife since late Tuesday afternoon after the inquest, when they had stopped for a brief moment to tell of their contemplated trip to New York and to suggest that she accompany them. She had been tempted to accept their invitation. A longing to run away from the mansion which she had called home from her earliest recollection, to separate herself from the tragedy of her aunt's murder had almost overpowered her. But her sense of horror at the crime, her determination to solve the mystery and bring her aunt's murderer to justice had conquered, and she had stayed on at the old house, refusing to follow Charles Craige's suggestion that she engage a trained nurse as a companion and go to a hotel. Nina Potter had promised to telephone to her immediately upon their return from New York, but so far she had received no message from her.

Kitty felt urgent need of clear-headed advice. Instinctively, she took up the telephone instrument. She had not seen Edward Rodgers since Tuesday night when they had discovered her aunt's will secreted under the plaster cast of the Gila monster, but he would come at her call—her woman's instinct told her that.

The telephone bell sounded with such suddenness that she almost dropped the instrument. Recovering herself she took off the receiver.

"Is that you, Miss Baird?" Edward Rodgers' deep tones were music in her ears. "Will you be in this evening? Can I see you?"

His questions came in such swift succession that Kitty had no chance to answer each individually.

"Do come," she called back. "I'll be very glad to see you."

"Righto—" The connection was poor and his voice sounded faintly over the wires. "In about an hour." With heightened color she hung up the receiver and Mandy, entering the dining room some seconds later, found her sitting demurely at her place at the head of the table, waiting patiently for the "tasty" broiled chicken.

During the service of the meal, Mandy kept up a running chatter of conversation, talking on any subject, regardless of its relevancy. Several times Kitty regarded her in surprise; it was not like Mandy to be garrulous.

"I've been fixin' to tell yo'," she announced as she removed the dessert plate, "dat Mrs. Potter done telephone yo' jes' a few minutes after yo' left this mawnin'. I declare yo' put it outer my haid when yo' telled me 'bout yo' dreamin' Oscar was hyar at five o'clock."

"Did Mrs. Potter say how she was, Mandy?" asked Kitty, as she arose.

"She had a mighty bad cold an' I couldn't hardly hear what she said, noways." Mandy advanced, silver coffee pot in hand. "Ain't yo' gwine ter take yo' coffee?"

"Yes, in the library. And Mandy, bring another cup," Kitty paused. "I am expecting Mr. Rodgers. There is the bell now—"

Mandy was smiling to herself as she walked toward the front door. Her smile broadened into an expansive grin at sight of Edward Rodgers.

"Come right in, sah; Miss Kitty's 'spectin' yo' in the lib'ry." She hovered about while he removed his hat and overcoat. "I'se glad yo've come; Miss Kitty's kinda peaked. It's nice yo' can keep her company."

"Thanks." Rodgers' dry tone was totally lost on Mandy. With a flourishing twist of the portières in front of the library door she announced:

"Mister Rodgers—" and discreetly disappeared inside her pantry.

As Kitty felt Rodgers' strong handclasp and met his ardent gaze, her heart beat more swiftly. Rodgers, scarcely conscious that he still held her hand, was unaware of the brief pause, being content to watch Kitty's piquant beauty.

"I've wanted to see you—to be with you," he stammered. "It's been an eternity."

Kitty's soft laugh interrupted him. "Come and sit down," she said. "I'm particularly glad you came to-night, for I want your advice badly."

"You do?" Rodgers followed her to the leather-covered lounge and sat down by her. "What about?"

"Hush!" Kitty had caught the sound of Mandy's heavy tread in the hall. "I'll tell you later after we have had our coffee. Come in, Mandy." Kitty raised her voice. "Bring the tray here and place it on this table."

With Rodgers' aid the old servant made room on the table for her tray, then, with a respectful "good night," she stumped away, taking care to drop the portières back in place. As Rodgers bent to pick up a napkin which he had inadvertently dropped, Kitty caught sight of the cuts on his head partially covered by a dressing.

"Good gracious! What have you done to yourself?" she cried.

"Ran head first into a door," replied Rodgers.

"Are you sure you are not badly hurt?" she asked gravely, noting the pallor of his usually ruddy cheeks. At the solicitude in her voice Rodgers colored and his eyes shone.

"Quite sure," he said, then made haste to change

the subject. "Have you seen Ben Potter to-day?"

"No. Nina telephoned to me this morning while I was out." She handed him her empty coffee cup to put down. "I haven't seen Ben since the day of the inquest."

Rodgers hesitated a moment. "Forgive the question—but—are you and he great friends?"

Kitty regarded him gravely. "Not great friends; we sometimes have spats," she admitted. A mischievous smile brought out her pretty dimples. "Our last dispute was on the subject of deportment and dress. I do not see how Nina stands his Puritanical ideas."

"Doesn't he approve of gay colors?"

"Gay colors!" Kitty laughed outright. "I should say not. Why, he nearly had a fit whenever I appeared in my red coat."

"He is a man of queer ideas," Rodgers commented dryly. "The red coat was most becoming to you. By the way, I haven't seen you wear it lately."

"I am having the coat dyed—" Seeing his surprised expression, she added, "Not because Ben disliked the color, but it was too faded."

"Did *you* take the coat to be dyed?" asked Rodgers, and she wondered at the persistency of his gaze.

"No. I gave it to Aunt Susan one day last week." Kitty sat bolt upright. "Dear me, I won-

der at which cleaning establishment she left the coat."

"You have no idea where it is?"

"Not the faintest idea in this world; Aunt Susan never dealt long at any one shop." Kitty shook her head. "The events of the past few days put the coat entirely out of my mind."

"Then your aunt was the last person to have your coat—?"

"She was certainly the last person in this household to handle it," she answered. "You speak as if the coat was of some consequence—" with a quick surprised glance at him.

Rogers paused as Oscar's warning recurred to him "She mustn't know nawthin'." Whatever the old negro's reasons might be for asking him not to discuss the red coat with Kitty—whether important or unimportant—he would keep faith with the old negro and not tell her of the incidents of the morning.

"I always liked the coat," he declared. "Suppose you don't get it back—?"

"Oh, the cleaners, whoever they are, will probably send it back when it is dyed so as to get paid," she answered carelessly. "It is a small loss anyway for the coat was about worn out." She sighed involuntarily and Rodgers looked at her intently.

"Isn't this house getting on your nerves?" he

asked, observing the deep shadows under her eyes which told their story of wakeful nights and frayed nerves.

"Not so much the house as the mystery," she admitted, with a slight shiver. "Have you discovered any clues?"

Rodgers touched a small "I.O.U." paper safely tucked inside his vest pocket. "Nothing of any consequence," he confessed. "I tried to see Inspector Mitchell this afternoon, but he never returned to Headquarters."

"He was here." Kitty paused and considered her companion. The mention of Inspector Mitchell brought back his questions about the Holt will contest. "By the way, the inspector asked if you had ever told me about the law suit over Colonel Holt's will."

Rodgers laid down his cigarette case unopened. "The Holt will case," he exclaimed. "Of what possible interest could that be to you?"

"Colonel Holt was my uncle." Observing his surprised expression, she added, "The inspector suggested that perhaps the fortune Aunt Susan left to me was given to her by Colonel Holt. I told him the idea was preposterous. Why, Aunt Susan would have nothing to do with Uncle Marcus. To my knowledge she never saw him. I doubt if he even knew of my existence."

Rodgers selected a cigarette. "May I smoke?" he asked, and for answer she handed him a box of matches. "I wish you and Colonel Holt had known each other. He was a fine old man; looked like a soldier of the French Empire."

"Was he a friend of yours?"

"I knew him slightly in a business way." Rodgers puffed at his cigarette until he had it drawing nicely. "How did Mitchell come to know that you were related?"

"I don't know," Kitty laughed a trifle vexedly. "The inspector evidently informed himself as to my relations; he even told me that Leigh Wallace and I are cousins."

Rodgers favored the "grandfather" clock across the library with a prolonged stare. Kitty was commencing to wonder at his silence, when he turned and addressed her.

"So you and Leigh are cousins," he said. "I had not realized that before. How near is the relationship?"

"We are first cousins, if what Inspector Mitchell said is true. My mother was Louise Holt, and I suppose her half-sister, Anne, was Leigh's mother. Odd, is it not, that Leigh never spoke of being related to me?" she added, after a slight pause.

Rodgers' gaze was transferred from the clock to

Kitty. "Was your aunt aware of the relationship?" he asked

"I imagine not. We haven't spoken of Colonel Holt for years," she answered. "Inspector Mitchell said the law suit was one of your big cases."

"I was called in as a handwriting expert." Rodgers moved restlessly. "Has Mitchell discovered any clues to your aunt's murder?"

"If he has, he has not confided them to me," she smiled mirthlessly. "He has succeeded in making me feel very uncomfortable—"

"In what way?" quickly.

"With his suspicions," she hesitated. "He insinuated that—" she did not complete her sentence; her eyes had strayed to the framed photograph of Leigh Wallace standing on a near-by table. After all, she could not voice her suspicions to Edward Rodgers. For nearly a month she had been aware of a growing coolness between the two men, and Wallace had been at no pains to conceal his anger whenever he had seen Kitty walking or motoring with Rodgers. Kitty had never detected any alteration in Rodgers' manner to Wallace. Whatever his opinion of the latter's surly behavior it had been cloaked under his customary air of good fellowship.

"I have something to tell you of more importance than Inspector Mitchell's veiled insinuations,"

she said, speaking rapidly to cover her change of topic. "Just after the Inspector's departure I was standing here by this table," indicating it as she spoke, "when the sound of voices reached me and I heard Oscar say: 'I'se done looked an' looked, an' I tell yo' ole Miss never left no sech papers.' And a woman's voice replied: 'Please, please keep up your search, Oscar. I'll give you more than I promised—a hundred dollars more.'"

Rodgers threw away his cigarette and stared at Kitty.

"Who was the woman?" he demanded.

"I do not know." Kitty rose and walked over to the Dutch door. "I tried to light the library lamp and wasted valuable seconds hunting for matches. When I finally got the lamp lighted, I found that I was alone in the library and the voices had come through this panel," laying her hand on it as she spoke. "I dashed outside but Oscar and his companion had disappeared in the darkness."

Rodgers followed her to the Dutch door, his face expressing both astonishment and deep attention.

"Have you no idea who the woman was?" he asked. "Hasn't Oscar told you her name and why she was bribing him?"

"Oscar," Kitty paused and looked carefully about the library. "Oscar, according to his wife, took the three o'clock train to Front Royal this afternoon."

"He did *what?*" shouted Rodgers, then at her startled look, he added more quietly, "Do you mean that Oscar has left Washington?"

"So Mandy told me."

Rodgers considered Kitty in silence. . . . Oscar a runaway—the red coat practically destroyed by fire—the I.O.U.—

Kitty was commencing to wonder at the prolonged silence when Rodgers spoke.

"At what hour did you overhear Oscar's conversation with the unknown woman?" he asked.

"About five o'clock."

Rodgers stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I should say that there was a nigger in the wood-pile," he said softly. "You are quite sure it was Oscar talking to the woman."

"Absolutely positive."

"Did you recognize the woman's voice?"

Kitty shook her head. "Her voice haunts me still," she said. "But I cannot place it. The whole affair bewilders me. I do not know what to think, what to conjecture. Our Oscar and Mandy, my aunt's faithful old servants, in league against me? Has some one bribed them to lie and steal—and with what object?"

Rodgers did not reply at once. Suddenly he reached over and, pressing the catch, slid the panel back and forth as Inspector Mitchell had done sev-

eral hours previously. His action reminded Kitty of the incident.

"That panel seems to fascinate you men," she exclaimed. "Inspector Mitchell spent fully ten minutes commenting upon its well-oiled hinges and its possible use."

"Its use?" Rodgers' voice was of the carrying quality, and it sounded distinctly through the open panel to a figure crouching in the shadow of the house. "Has the panel been used for any special purpose?"

"No, it is purely ornamental."

"Didn't the postman ever drop mail through it?"

"No. Our mail box is fastened to the front door."

Rodgers' gaze had strayed to the floor. Stooping down he rubbed his hand over the bare hardwood boards. "Your flooring is well worn right here," he said. "Some weight or some one has stood here constantly. Bend closer and you will see that the varnish is completely worn away."

Kitty followed his suggestion. "I don't understand," she exclaimed, standing erect. "It bewilders me. What does it mean?"

"Some one has been using this panel—for what purpose we have yet to find out." Rodgers spoke half to himself, then asked more loudly: "Have you given all your aunt's papers to Mr. Craige?"

"Yes—even old letters."

"Do you know their contents?"

"I did not stop to read them all." Kitty's troubled expression deepened. "I gave him every paper I could find."

"I am glad Mr. Craige has them," exclaimed Rodgers heartily. "If he has the papers which the woman bribed Oscar to secure for her, we can solve *that* mystery. There is just one other question, Miss Baird, Did your aunt see very much of Mrs. Amos Parsons?"

Outside in the shadows the listening figure stiffened as it bent dangerously close to catch Kitty's answer.

"Not any more than Aunt Susan could help—" Kitty's tired young voice held a hint of mirth as it came through the open panel. "She abominated Mrs. Parsons and deeply resented my acting as her secretary."

Rodgers contemplated Kitty for several seconds, then stepped briskly toward the telephone.

"With your permission," he said, "I'll call up Mr. Craige and ask if he can see us this evening."

CHAPTER XV

BOUND IN RED TAPE

"WHAR yo' goin', Honey, at dis time o' night?" Mandy's voice was raised in shocked expostulation and Kitty could not refrain from a smile. She had interrupted the old servant in the act of arranging her bedroom for the night when she had entered a moment before and taken her heavy overcoat and hat out of the closet.

"Mr. Rodgers is going to run me over to see my god-father, Mr. Craige," she explained as she arranged her veil. "Don't wait up for me, Mandy; I have the key of the side door and can let myself in. You are not afraid to stay here alone, are you?"

"No'm." But Mandy spoke with no enthusiasm. "I ain't skeered, kexactly, but yo' won't be very late, will yo'?"

"Oh, no." Kitty glanced at the clock on her dressing table. "It is only a quarter of nine, Mandy; I'll be back within the hour. Sit down be-

fore the fire," pointing to the grate where Mandy, with solicitious forethought had built a coal fire for her young mistress to enjoy when undressing, "and make yourself comfortable. Don't stay in a cold kitchen."

"Thank yo', Miss Kitty. I 'spects I'd ruther stay up hyar, it's mo' cheerful." Mandy walked into the hall with her. "Mind yo' keep that collar buttoned up."

"All right, Mandy." Kitty, touched by the old woman's care for her, laid her hand for a minute on her rounded shoulder. "Don't worry and keep warm."

Mandy waited in the hall, her woolly head, covered with a bright bandanna handkerchief, cocked in a listening attitude until she heard Kitty and Ted Rodgers depart and the side door closed. Taking a general survey of the empty hall, Mandy limped back into Kitty's bedroom and drew a tufted armchair up to the grate, selecting a "comfortable" from those stored in the hall closet and wrapping herself in it, she settled down in the chair. For a time she was wakeful, but as the hands of the clock approached the hour, her head drooped sideways and a subdued snore gave proof that she had fallen asleep. So sound was her slumber that the incessant clattter of the bell on the branch telephone,

which Kitty had had installed the day before, made no impression upon her.

From her corner near the fire the angora cat, Mouchette, slumbered also. A shower of sparks, as a piece of burning cannel-coal dropped through the grate, singed her fur and woke her just as a figure crept through the partly open bedroom door and into the room. Its objective seemed to be an old-fashioned secretary in the southeast corner of the room. At sight of Mandy, asleep in the chair, the intruder paused, listened attentively to her regular breathing, then, reassured, moved onward across the room, followed by Mouchette's large yellow eyes.

The cat licked her singed fur, then, with a faint "mew," started in the direction of the secretary. A second later a graceful leap had landed her on the chair beside it, and she purred contentedly as the intruder turned and gently stroked her head. In her chair by the fire old Mandy snored peacefully, oblivious alike of the rustle of papers being removed from the secretary and the antics of the cat.

Kitty was relieved to find Ted Rodgers a silent companion as they drove out to Chevy Chase, for she was in no mood for small talk. The rush of the cold air against her hot cheeks and the steady throb of the motor as the car raced up one hill and down another brought a sense of relaxation and

rest to her tired nerves. A restless longing to get out of the house, away from her thoughts, had pursued her all day. The big, silent man by her side and his air of protection were a tonic in themselves, and she forgot her sorrows and perplexities in the enjoyment of the unexpected trip to Chevy Chase, Washington's fashionable suburb.

Nearly a year before, Charles Craige had purchased from one of his clients a cottage in Chevy Chase and had moved his Lares and Penates from his bachelor apartment in the Hadleigh. His English butler, Lambert, and the latter's wife, Mildred, ran his house for him, as they had his apartment. Invitations to his hospitable entertainments were eagerly sought, for he was a born host and nothing gave him more delight than to have his friends about him. Mothers with marriageable daughters and widows never lost hope of catching so worthwhile a *parti* and Craige had been reported engaged upon numerous occasions. Kitty had always entertained a genuine affection for her god-father, to whose kind offices she had owed many attentions upon her début in Washington society. It was he who had introduced her to Mrs. Parsons, and through his suggestion the gay widow had secured Kitty as her social secretary.

In what seemed an incredibly short time to Kitty, Ted Rodgers drove his roadster under the *porte-*

cochère of "Hideaway." Lambert came immediately in answer to Kitty's ring, and his usually solemn manner thawed at the sight of her.

"The master will be 'ere in a moment," he explained, helping them off with their wraps. "Just step into the living room, Miss Kitty. I 'ave a fresh fire laid there. Mr. Craige told me you were h'expected."

The living room always aroused Ted Rodgers' admiration, for it represented his idea of comfort combined with good taste. Craige had a love of art and an appreciation of the beautiful and ample means to gratify both. In furnishing his house, he had spared no expense.

"Aunt Susan was very fond of this room," Kitty said as she wandered about examining the paintings on the walls. "She and Mr. Craige were great cronies. In fact," and Kitty's smile showed each pretty dimple, "he was about the only man she approved of."

"So she told me," Rodgers' smile was fleeting. "I wasn't in her good graces—" he stooped to pick up the fire-tongs which Lambert had inadvertently left lying on the floor before the brass fender when hurrying to answer the front door bell. "Your aunt gave me to understand at our last interview that I was *personna non grata.* Had she lived," Rodgers

paused and looked at Kitty, "I imagine she would have tried to turn you against me."

Kitty blushed. "It wasn't you in particular," she began impulsively. "Aunt Susan was frequently discourteous to my friends. There were none she liked when she found they—they—that is, that they liked me." She laughed to cover her confusion.

"They wished to marry you—as I do—" the words caught her unawares. "Kitty, my darling," he pleaded. "Don't turn from me; give me a chance. I've loved you so silently, so deeply—" his voice shook with feeling. "You have grown to be my life—my religion—"

"Hush!"

"No; you must hear me, Kitty." He was pale with the intensity of his emotion. "I thought that I could be content just to see you—to be with you; but it has gone beyond that. I must *know* if there is a chance for me. Is there, my dearest? I know that I am unworthy—"

Kitty's heart was beating to suffocation as she turned bravely and faced him. She had flirted many a time before and had turned aside a proposal with light-hearted banter, but her coquetry had deserted her utterly.

"Ted!" she whispered.

"Kitty!" In an instant his arms were about her. "Kitty!" His voice deepened. "My best be-

loved—" and as she raised her head to look into his eyes their lips met in the first kiss of love.

Forgetful of all else save each other, the lovers were brought back to the everyday world and their surroundings by a determined cough. Looking hastily around, Kitty spied Charles Craige regarding them from the doorway.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said dryly; then as Kitty ran to him, her eyes like twin stars and the rich color mantling her cheeks, his manner altered and his tone grew tender. "Dear child, in so far as I may, I give you a father's blessing. Rodgers, you are to be congratulated," and his hearty handshake emphasized his words. His eyes strayed to a large portrait photograph of Mrs. Amos Parsons which was the chief ornament on the mantelpiece. "I can understand and appreciate your happiness," he added. "I hope some day soon to tell you I have won the dearest woman in the world—"

"Except one—" broke in Rodgers, glancing proudly at Kitty.

"Perhaps so," agreed Craige cheerily. "And when is the engagement to be announced?"

"Oh, don't say a word about it, please," Kitty begged; then, with a quick shy glance at Rodgers, "We must keep the secret until the mystery surrounding Aunt Susan's death is solved."

"It makes a double incentive to clear up the case,"

declared Rodgers. "Come, Kitty, sit by the fire and I'll explain to Craige the errand which brought us to see him to-night."

Obediently, Kitty curled herself up on the big sofa which stood facing the huge open fireplace. Her unhappy restlessness had deserted her. In its stead a feeling of peace, of renewed courage and unutterable happiness encompassed her, and she was content to sit idly by and watch the two men. As they stood with their backs to the fire, she was struck by their distinguished appearance. Craige, with his iron-grey hair and dark moustache, was the handsomer of the two, but Kitty decided that Rodgers' more rugged features, offset by the deep dimple, almost a cleft in his chin, indicated the more determined character. His dark hair was inclined to curl, in spite of every effort on his part to keep it straight, and Kitty liked its wavy appearance better than the severe style which Craige preferred. As Craige held a match to Rodgers' cigar she was surprised by their similarity in height. Had any one asked her she would have said that Rodgers was the heavier and the taller by a quarter of an inch.

"This afternoon," Rodgers had waited to commence his explanation of their call until his cigar was drawing nicely. "Kitty overheard an unknown woman bribe Oscar to steal some papers which had belonged to her aunt, Miss Susan Baird."

"That is interesting," Craige pulled his mustache thoughtfully. "You say the woman was unknown. Describe her appearance, Kitty."

"I can't, for I did not see her," she explained. "The woman had gone when I looked into the garden, and Oscar with her."

"Then you haven't questioned Oscar?"

"Oscar," Kitty spoke more slowly, "according to Mandy, Oscar was on the train to Front Royal this afternoon, but I can swear that it was Oscar I heard; also the woman called him by name."

"Then it must have been Oscar," Craige commented dryly. "And Mandy lied to you."

"What could have been her object?" asked Kitty. "She must realize that we can trace Oscar's whereabouts."

"That is already being done by the police," Rodgers put in quickly. "I called up Inspector Mitchell from your house, Kitty, while you were upstairs getting your wraps, and told him that Oscar had disappeared. He promised to try and locate the old man at once."

"Good!" Craige's tone spoke his satisfaction. "Now, as to the woman, did her voice give you no clue to her identity, Kitty?"

"No, I could not place it—" Kitty hesitated. "But I am convinced that I have heard her voice before."

"Very likely," agreed Craige. "It must have

been some one who knew your aunt, and therefore is probably acquainted with you, also. Now, what papers could she have wanted?"

"That is the question which has brought us to see you," Kitty explained. "Yesterday I gave you the contents of Aunt Susan's desk—"

"Her papers are here—" As he spoke, Craige went over to a table and pulling out one of the drawers, carried it back to the sofa and put it down by Kitty. "Hereafter I will keep all Susan's papers in my office vault, now that I know some one is vitally interested in gaining possession of them."

"Have you looked them over?" questioned Rodgers.

Craige nodded assent. "They are receipted bills for taxes, marketing, and so forth. See, Kitty," holding up a bundle neatly tied with red tape. "Your aunt was very methodical."

"She was indeed," Kitty sighed as she untied one of the bundles. "Suppose we each take a package and run through it."

Silence prevailed while the packages were being opened and gone over with a thoroughness which omitted nothing. Kitty's nimble fingers made quicker work of the knotted red tape and therefore to her fell the last bundle in the drawer. As she turned over the commonplace receipted bills, most of them for groceries and coal, she thought bitterly

of the frugality which she and her aunt had needlessly practiced, and of the years she had spent in denying herself pleasures which the average American girl accepts, not as luxuries, but as necessities. Expert bank officials had estimated the negotiable securities and money left by her aunt as totalling over eight hundred thousand dollars—nearly a million—and her aunt had lived a life of genteel poverty during all the years that Kitty could remember.

As Kitty sorted the bills in her lap, a small envelope, yellow and worn with age, tumbled out. She opened it and, unfolding the old-fashioned note paper, read the cramped penmanship with some difficulty.

"This is evidently a love letter addressed to Aunt Susan," she exclaimed. "Listen," and she read aloud:

RICHMOND, VA., April 1, 1867.

MY DARLING SUSAN:

I have called upon your mother and disclosed my affection for you, and she has graciously given me permission to marry you.

I hope that I may never meet with your disapprobation.

Transported with joy and expectation, I am

Your fond lover,

JAMES LEIGH WALLACE.

Kitty looked at her companions in wide-eyed as-

tonishment. "James Leigh Wallace," she repeated. "Who could that be?"

"Leigh Wallace's father," Rodgers replied. "I knew the old man. But—" he paused, "that James Leigh Wallace married Colonel Holt's sister, Anne Holt."

Craige completed his examination of old receipts and retied the bundle. "Do you suppose, Kitty, that your aunt could have been secretly married?" he asked.

For answer Kitty held up a small object and a newspaper clipping which she had taken a second before from the envelope containing the love letter.

"It is a withered rose," she said softly, holding it out in the palm of her hand. "And this—" she opened the clipping—"the notice of the marriage in San Francisco of Anne Holt to James Leigh Wallace, on April 1, 1869." She looked up in wonder. "See, here at the bottom of the clipping is written one word in Aunt Susan's handwriting—'jilted!'"

Craige was the first to speak.

"It is not surprising that Miss Susan Baird hated young Leigh Wallace," he remarked quietly. "She was not the type of woman to forgive an injury or forget an insult."

CHAPTER XVI

A STARTLING ENCOUNTER

TED RODGERS ran down the three steps leading to the *porte-cochère* of "Hideaway," and opened the door of his car.

"Wouldn't you like to drive?" he asked, turning to Kitty standing in the doorway with Charles Craige. Kitty's hesitation was brief.

"Indeed I would!" she exclaimed. "I feel all keyed up—"

Craige smiled indulgently. "Get as much pleasure as you can," he advised. "You deserve the good things of life, Kitty. Now, put your aunt's tragic death out of your mind—for to-night, at least," observing her sober expression. "I will see you to-morrow and we will make a further search among your aunt's belongings for the papers wanted so mysteriously. Rodgers, take good care of her," and he waved his hand in farewell as Kitty started the car down the driveway.

Craige's picturesque cottage, "Hideaway," concealed from its neighbors by tall box hedges, was

located on a street near Chevy Chase Circle, and, as their car made the turn around it, Rodgers bent closer to Kitty.

"Let's run through Rock Creek Park," he coaxed. "It isn't very much further, and—" his voice grew very tender. "I want so to talk to you all by yourself."

Kitty wavered a moment in doubt. She had promised Mandy to return within the hour—but she had already stayed more than an hour at her godfather's home. Probably Mandy had long since gone to bed. Rodgers' hand on her's settled her hesitation as, with tender clasp, he turned the steering wheel toward the road leading into the park.

The heavy wind of the early evening had died down and as they sped down the moonlit road Kitty's cup of happiness seemed filled to the brim. They drove in silence—the silence of perfect companionship and understanding—each content with the other's presence and their thought of one another.

"Stop here a moment; the view over the Park is wonderful." Rodgers leaned forward and pushed up the windshield to the farthest limit. "You can see better now." But when Kitty slowed down at the side of the road she found him regarding her and not the moonlight on the rolling hills and valley before them.

"You meant it, Kitty; you *do* care for me?" he asked wistfully. "Really care?"

Kitty's soft laugh held happiness behind it. "I care so much—" her voice dropped to a mere whisper and he had to lean still closer to catch what she said. "My love is yours, always—always."

Rodgers held her in close embrace. "My beloved," he murmured and he kissed her with a fervor which left her breathless.

"Ted," she said, a little later. "Aunt Susan's love letter haunts me. It told a pitiful story."

He nodded soberly. "Perhaps that is what warped her nature," he suggested. "James Leigh Wallace was an out-and-out scoundrel. He gambled his soul away—anything to gain money to lose in some gambling hell."

"I never heard of him before," she replied. "Now I understand Aunt Susan's antipathy to his son. I thought it unreasoning dislike. Leigh—" she hesitated.

"I've been so jealous of Leigh," Rodgers confessed. "Every one thought you were engaged."

"People are such idiots!" she ejaculated, then added almost in a whisper, "It was always you, dear, never Leigh, that I cared for. He was with me because—because Nina Potter and I were together."

A low whistle escaped Rodgers. "By jove!" he

exclaimed. "I did hear some time ago that Leigh was attentive to a Miss Underwood—it never dawned on me that she was the one who married Ben Potter."

"Did you know Leigh very well in San Francisco?" asked Kitty.

"Pretty well, before he entered the army—civilian appointment, you know," he added. "I used to see him frequently at Mrs. Parsons' home in San Francisco. By the way, Ben was a great friend of hers in those days."

"Who, Mrs. Parsons—?" quickly.

"Yes—some people thought she might marry him."

Kitty smiled. "The idea is droll," she commented. "Ben has chosen a much more suitable wife. I cannot imagine Mrs. Parsons and Ben in love with each other; they are such opposite natures. But, dear," turning troubled eyes toward him, "you say Mrs. Parsons and Leigh were good friends—there's something I must tell you. Just vague suspicions," she hesitated. "I cannot bear to be disloyal—to harbor suspicions against a man I have called my friend, but—" she took from her pocket a piece of mauve-colored paper—"I lunched with Leigh today at the Shoreham and our waiter slipped this paper into his hand. Leigh carelessly dropped it on

my doorstep, and not realizing what I was doing, I read it."

Rodgers took the paper and, holding it under the dash-light, peered at the writing. "Leigh, you are watched," he read the words aloud and then reversed the paper.

"There is nothing else on it," Kitty explained. "But the message is in Mrs. Parsons' handwriting."

In the darkness Kitty failed to see Rodgers' odd expression. After waiting vainly for some comment, she added. "Do you suppose that Mrs. Parsons suspects Leigh is in some way responsible for Aunt Susan's death?"

"That might be inferred." Rodgers folded the paper and placed it carefully in his leather wallet. "With your permission, I'll keep this."

"Certainly, Ted." Kitty put her foot on the self-starter. "I am only too thankful to give it to you and to have you, dear, to confide in." He returned her warm handclasp with a grip that hurt. "But, Ted, how is it that Mrs. Parsons knows that the police are watching Leigh?"

"The police?" echoed Rodgers. "Oh, ah, yes. Perhaps she has had another call from Inspector Mitchell; I saw him coming away from there yesterday."

"But why in the world should he confide in Mrs. Parsons?"

"I don't know—" Rodgers was frowning in the darkness, and Kitty, intent on starting the car, did not notice the alteration in his voice. "I don't know why any one puts trust in Mrs. Parsons."

"Why, Ted!" Kitty looked at him in surprise. "I never knew you disliked Mrs. Parsons."

"I have no use for her," he admitted. "I never did like cats—even your Mouchette."

"Imagine putting Mrs. Parsons in a class with Mouchette," Kitty chuckled, then grew grave. "Ted, you don't suppose, really suppose, that Leigh could have killed Aunt Susan, a defenceless old lady."

"With a serpent's tongue." The words were no sooner spoken than Rodgers regretted them. "Forgive me, darling—"

"I know poor Aunt Susan was not loved—." A sigh escaped Kitty. "Can it be that Aunt Susan quarreled with Leigh over his father's treatment of her—"

"It might be," Rodgers' tone was grave. "But so far we do not even know that Leigh was at your house on Sunday afternoon. Don't brood over the tragedy, Kitty; forget it, for to-night, at least. Here's a clear stretch of road ahead—step on the gas."

Instinctively, Kitty followed his suggestion and the car shot ahead. The wind fanned their cheeks through the opened windshield, and Kitty was con-

scious of a feeling of exhilaration as they tore onward, gathering speed with each throb of the powerful engine. In the distance Kitty descried a car approaching and dimmed her headlights. The courtesy was not returned; instead a spotlight swung directly on them and Kitty, blinded by the glare, swerved to the right as the oncoming car swept up. She heard a deafening report, something swished by her, and the car raced up the road they had just traversed.

Checking the speed of her own car, Kitty swung it back into the center of the road and turned, white-lipped, to Rodgers.

"How dare they drive like that!" she gasped. "They must be drunk or cra—" Her voice failed her at sight of Rodgers sitting huddled back in the car—there was something unnatural in his pose which chilled the blood in her veins. "Ted!"

Her call met with no response.

Slowly she put out her hand and touched his shoulder; then her hand crept upward to his face and forehead. What she touched felt moist and sticky. She jerked her hand downward so that the light from the dash-lamp fell upon it. It was covered with blood.

There was a sound of a thousand Niagaras roaring in her ears as she brought the roadster to a standstill and turned to Rodgers. Bending down

she pressed her ear over his heart—its feeble beat reassured her—he was still alive.

Kitty searched frantically for her handkerchief and for his. Tying them together she bound his wound as best she could; then with compressed lips and in breathless haste she started the car headlong for Washington. As they tore madly down the road, one question only throbbed through her aching head:

Who had shot her lover?

CHAPTER XVII

"K. B."

INSPECTOR MITCHELL looked at the policeman standing in front of his desk with approval.

"You have done well, Donovan," he exclaimed. "Exactly at what hour was Major Leigh Wallace seen leaving 'Rose Hill' on Sunday afternoon?"

"Mrs. Murray claims that it was about five o'clock or a little after," Donovan replied, consulting his notes.

"And why hasn't she reported this before?"

"She's been ill with the grippe, and all news of the murder was kept from her," the policeman answered. "She told her boy to-day, after learning about Miss Baird's death, to watch for me when I was on my beat. I went over to see her the moment my relief came. It wasn't an hour ago," looking at the office clock which registered half-past nine, "Mrs. Murray said she would be glad to talk to you to-morrow, but to-night she feels too weak."

"Which is her house?"

"The one next to the Baird mansion on the east—this way—" Donovan moved his hands about to demonstrate his sense of direction. "It's the house you have to pass to return to Washington."

"Was Major Wallace in his car on Sunday afternoon?"

"No, sir, he was walking." Donovan waited a moment before adding, "Mrs. Murray swears she knows Major Wallace well by sight; that she's seen him too often waiting for Miss Kitty Baird to be mistaken. She was just stepping into her front walk when the Major brushed by her in such a devil of a hurry that he nearly knocked her down."

Mitchell closed the drawers of his desk, locked them, and arose. "That is all now, Donovan," he said. "Report at once if you obtain any further information. Don't wait to come in person, telephone."

"All right, Inspector," and saluting, Donovan hurried away. The door had hardly closed after him before it opened to admit a plain clothes detective.

"Well, Welsh, what luck?" Mitchell asked eagerly.

"An old colored man did board the three o'clock train this afternoon for Front Royal, Inspector," he reported. "The gatekeeper and one of the por-

ters declared that he answered the description you furnished."

"Was a woman with him?"

"No, sir; not that I can find out. Every one swears that the old man was alone."

Mitchell considered the answer in silence. "There is nothing for it but a trip to Front Royal," he said finally. "Go there, Welsh, and find out if Oscar Jackson arrived there to-day on the *three o'clock* train—no later train, mind you—from Washington. I understood Mr. Rodgers to say that Oscar is from Front Royal and has relatives living in its vicinity. Therefore he is known and I don't anticipate that you will have difficulty in locating him. Keep me informed by telephone."

"Very good, Inspector." Welsh paused half way to the door as a thought struck him. "Did you get a message from Mr. Benjamin Potter?"

"No. What did he want?"

"He didn't say." Welsh again started for the door. "Just asked to have you call him up. Wasn't his wife one of the witnesses at the Baird inquest?"

"She was—" Mitchell was already reaching for the telephone directory. "As you go out, Welsh, tell Allen to bring my car around at once."

Getting the Potter apartment on the telephone was more difficult than Mitchell expected; the naturalist used a private wire and it was only by virtue of his

office that Mitchell was supplied with the number by "Information." Another wait ensued as Central claimed the wire "busy," and it was with perceptible irritation that the Inspector answered the hoarse, "Hello," that finally responded to his repeated calls.

"Can I speak to Mr. Potter?" he asked.

"Mr. Potter is out—" a violent cough interrupted the speaker. "Is there any message?"

"Who is speaking?"

"Mrs. Potter."

"I beg pardon, Madam." Mitchell moderated his voice. "This is Detective Headquarters—Inspector Mitchell on the 'phone. Your husband left word for me to telephone to him. Do you know what he wished?"

"No." The curtness of her tone annoyed Mitchell.

"When will your husband return?" he asked, raising his voice.

"Very soon, I imagine." There was a pause, and Mitchell concluded she was consulting her watch, for she went on, "It is nearly ten o'clock. Shall I have Mr. Potter call you?"

Mitchell considered before replying. "No. I may have to go out, so I will ring him up. Thank you, Madam; good night." He barely caught her hoarsely echoed "Good night," before hanging up the receiver.

Mitchell paused to jot down the Potters' telephone number in his notebook, then, securing his hat and overcoat, made for the street. Only pausing to exchange a hasty greeting with a brother officer, he jumped into the police car.

"The Baird house in Georgetown, Allen," he directed, and sat in impatient silence as they whirled through the city streets. He was tired of inaction. Whatever the hour he could not rest until he had interviewed Kitty Baird. Mitchell had gained his promotion to inspector through ability, backed by dogged detemination. He had early decided that the mystery of Miss Baird's murder could best be solved through watching Kitty Baird and, as he had expressed it earlier that evening to Coroner Penfield, "wringing the truth from her."

"She benefited by her aunt's death and, by heaven, she is the only one living who did," he had declared. "And it stands one hundred to one that if she doesn't actually know who bumped her aunt off, she can make a mighty accurate guess."

Mitchell's temper did not cool down on his arrival at "Rose Hill," but on the contrary gathered heat as he stood before the front door and rang the bell with increasing vigor as the minutes lengthened. The door was finally opened a tiny bit, and through the crack a pair of beady black eyes peered at him in the uncertain light.

"Who's dar?" demanded Mandy, her trembling tones belying her belligerent attitude as she braced herself so as to shut the door in case the caller pushed against it.

"Inspector Mitchell," the latter announced briefly. "Let me in, Mandy."

Slowly the door was pulled open, but it was not until the old servant could distinguish Mitchell's features with the aid of the hall light that she stepped aside and allowed him to enter.

"What yo' want?" she asked.

"To see Miss Kitty Baird."

"At this time o' night?" in scandalized surprise.

"That's all right about the hour," with marked impatience. "Go tell her I am here."

Mandy wavered—the power of the law as represented by a policeman, not to mention an inspector, loomed large in her vision.

"Miss Kitty am out," she announced briefly.

"At this hour?" Mitchell smiled skeptically. "Go call her, Mandy."

" 'Deed I'se tellin' yo' de truff," she protested. "She went out wif Mister Edward Rodgers early in de evenin', an' she ain't come back, 'cause I'se been awaitin' up fo' her."

Mitchell stared at Mandy, then, putting out his hand, shut the front door.

"Go to bed," he said, not unkindly. "I'll wait here and let Miss Baird in when she returns."

But Mandy did not budge. "Yo' means well," she said, somewhat mollified. "But I cain't go to bed 'till Miss Kitty gets in. If yo' care to set awhile, come right in to de li'bry."

Mitchell stopped her as she turned to go down the hall. "Let me stay in the parlor," he said. "I can see Miss Baird and Mr. Rodgers when they drive up. I wish to speak to Mr. Rodgers as well as Miss Baird, and he may leave without entering the house."

Mandy retraced her steps to a closed door. "De parlor's been kep' shut up so long I 'spects yo'll freeze," she said. "Dar ain't much heat comes in hyar from de furnace."

"That's all right; I'll keep on my overcoat." Mitchell stepped briskly into the room. "Let me light the gas, Mandy," as the old servant fumbled with the gas fixture, stiffened from lack of use. "Run along, now."

"Yes, sir," but Mandy lingered by the door. "I'll be up in Miss Kitty's bedroom—jes' fetch a yell ef yo' needs me, Mister Inspector."

As he listened to Mandy's halting footsteps growing fainter and fainter as she climbed wearily upstairs, Mitchell contemplated the large square room filled with "period" furniture. The old brocades

were shabby and the rugs worn, but there was an indefinable atmosphere of the refinement of a bygone generation which time and neglect had not destroyed.

Mitchell raised the shades in the windows overlooking Q Street and peered outside. No automobile except his own, waiting at the curb, was in sight. Satisfied on that point, he opened the window ever so slightly that he might be sure and hear a car drive up to the door, and then, to occupy his time, he wandered about the room and examined the many pieces of bric-a-brac on the mantel and in cabinets.

One cabinet in particular attracted his attention. It was a fine piece of Florentine workmanship and remarkably well preserved. The floor of the cabinet held miniatures of, presumably, ancestors of Miss Susan Baird, and after a cursory glance at them, Mitchell scanned the articles on the glass shelves. A set of carved ivory chessmen awoke his admiration and observing that the key was in the door of the cabinet he opened it. After examining the little chessmen, he turned his attention to the ivory checkers and then to the two ivory cups for holding dice. The carving on them was very fine and to see them better Mitchell carried them to the gas light.

Glancing at the red dice cup, he was surprised to find cotton stuffed inside it. Setting down the other

cup, Mitchell pulled out the layer of cotton and found a small bottle standing upright. It was held in the center of the cup by cotton packed around it. Drawing out the bottle he held it up to the light. It was almost empty. Mitchell pulled out the glass stopper and sniffed at the contents. A distinct smell of bitter almonds caused him to draw in his breath sharply.

"Prussic acid!" he muttered. "By God! And Miss Susan Baird was poisoned with a dose of it."

There was no label on the small phial. Taking out his handkerchief Mitchell replaced the glass stopper, and wrapped his handkerchief about the phial. Putting it carefully in his pocket, he paused for a moment to take another look at the dice cups, then replaced them in the cabinet. He and two of his assistants had made a complete and searching examination of the parlor immediately after the discovery of the crime. Mitchell was willing to swear that neither cotton nor phial had been in the dice cup then. Who had hidden the incriminating evidence there? Who had had the opportunity to do so? Kitty Baird . . . .

Mitchell frowned heavily as he ran over in his mind the list of callers at the Baird home since the tragedy became known. The house was under surveillance and he felt confident no one had evaded the watchful eyes of his operatives. He dismissed

the majority of callers—friends and acquaintances who had left cards and letters of condolence—and his thoughts centered on those whom old Oscar had admitted—Charles Craige, Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Potter, Edward Rodgers, and Major Leigh Wallace —but to the best of his knowledge the Major had *not* been inside the Baird house. He had seen Kitty and Wallace arrive that afternoon, but Wallace had departed without entering; therefore, he could not have had an opportunity to secrete the bottle of poison in the ivory dice cup.

But Mitchell's puzzled expression did not lighten, instead it deepened. He was wrong, Wallace had been in the house after the discovery of the murder, for he had accompanied Dr. Leonard McLean to the house on Monday morning. Could the young officer have slipped unseen into the parlor and concealed the bottle of poison while he, Mitchell, and Coroner Penfield were superintending the removal of Miss Baird's body from the library to her bedroom?

Bah! the idea was absurd. A man would not return to the scene of a murder with incriminating evidence in his pocket when he had had hours in which to throw away the poison without arousing suspicion. But supposing Wallace had, in the horror of the moment, forgotten the bottle? Mitchell shook his head in disbelief. Whoever perpetrated so cold-blooded and premeditated a crime was not

apt to overlook getting rid of the poison at the first opportunity.

With Wallace eliminated, Mitchell turned his thoughts to Kitty's other callers—Ben Potter and his pretty wife, and Charles Craige, the brilliant lawyer and popular clubman. Mitchell smiled broadly—no possible motive linked them in any way, shape or manner with the crime. Edward Rodgers —Mitchell frowned as Mrs. Parsons' confidences recurred to him. Whatever his connection with the Holt will case, nothing had occurred to associate Rodgers with the murder of Miss Baird. The fact that he was madly in love with her niece was patent to all, but it did not constitute evidence that he had a hand in murdering her aunt.

The exhaust from an automobile broke the stillness and Mitchell paused only long enough at the window to see that a car had stopped near his. The next second he was hurrying down the terraced steps, his mind made up. Kitty had quarreled with her aunt on Sunday afternoon; she had inherited her wealth, and she had had the greatest opportunity to slip the bottle of prussic acid into its hiding place unknown to any one. There were questions which Kitty alone could answer, and she must answer them immediately.

As Mitchell hurried to the side of the automobile,

its owner stepped on the running board and faced him.

"Mr. Potter!" exclaimed Mitchell. "Did they tell you at Headquarters that I was here?"

Potter peered at him in uncertainty for a second. "Oh, Inspector," he said. "I'm glad to see you, but I had no idea you were here. The fact is," lowering his voice as Allen, tired of waiting in Mitchell's car, climbed out on the sidewalk and drew near the two men. "My wife called up Miss Baird and couldn't get an answer. We both felt concerned about my cousin and I ran over to see if anything was the matter. Why are you here?"

"I wanted to talk to Miss Baird," Mitchell answered. "However, she is out—"

"Out? At this hour?"

"Yes. Mandy told me that she was motoring with Mr. Rodgers," explained Mitchell. "I decided to wait for her return, and when you drove up, I thought it was Mr. Rodgers."

Potter's expression hardened. "I don't approve of Kitty going out at night with Rodgers without a chaperon," he grumbled. "Nor is it proper for her to live in this lonely house with only ignorant servants." He turned back to his car and lifted out a camera and several packages. "Kitty left these at our apartment on Saturday, and Nina asked me to

bring them to her before the chemicals get mixed with mine."

"Chemicals," repeated Mitchell softly. "What kind of chemicals?"

"For developing negatives." Potter started for the house and Mitchell kept pace with him. "Kitty has quite a craze that way—does good work for an amateur. Some of her animal studies are excellent, especially of her cat, Mouchette."

"Seems to me there are quite a number of poisons used in developing films and negatives," Mitchell remarked thoughtfully.

"Yes, get all you want at a kodak shop. Kitty bought a new supply last Saturday," Potter replied carelessly. "Good Lord! What's that?"

The exclamation was drawn from him by the sound of a motor horn which grew in volume as the car approached nearer and both men looked down Q Street.

"Gee! Some one's breaking the law!" exclaimed Allen, attracted by the oncoming car whose headlights brightened the whole street.

With a grinding of brakes and totally regardless of stopping on the wrong side of the street, the driver drew up to the curb close to the three men and Mitchell recognized Kitty Baird sitting behind the steering wheel.

"Come here, quick!" she called. *"Quick!"*

"Kitty!" Potter sprang to her side. "What's wrong, child? What's happened? Don't look so terrified."

"Ted has been shot!" Kitty was on the sidewalk and around the car with lightning speed. "Don't stand there talking—help me carry Ted into my house and then go for a doctor."

Mitchell brushed her unceremoniously aside and looked in the car. The sight of Rodgers' unconscious form called for action.

"Come here, Allen," he called. "Take hold—gently, man, gently."

It seemed an age to Kitty before the three men carried their burden up the long terraced steps and into the house.

"Go up to the bedroom at the head of the stairs," she directed. "Mandy," to the colored woman who, aroused by the noise of tramping feet and voices, appeared at the top of the staircase. "Show them into the spare bedroom and help them get the bed ready for Mr. Rodgers. I'll telephone at once for Dr. McLean."

Twenty minutes later Kitty stood with clenched hands waiting for the surgeon's verdict. She had paced the hall until physical exhaustion had called a halt.

"Will he live, doctor?" she asked. "Don't keep

me in suspense." And the agony in her eyes caused McLean to hurry his usually slow speech.

"Yes, if there are no complications—"

Kitty waited to hear no more. Turning abruptly, she stumbled toward her own room—she could not face any one just then. She had reached the end of endurance.

"Miss Baird," Mitchell's stern voice caused her to falter just outside her bedroom door. "Who shot Edward Rodgers?"

"I don't know," she stammered. "We were coming home through Rock Creek Park and a car dashed by us. I was blinded by its headlights. I heard a report—" she caught her breath sharply. "I turned and found Mr. Rodgers sitting unconscious—wounded as you found him. I brought him home—ah, I can't talk to you now—go—go!" And she half walked, half staggered across the threshold of her bedroom and into Mandy's sympathetic arms.

Mitchell went slowly downstairs and out into the street. Allen, his chauffeur, was standing by Edward Rodgers' car, and at sight of the inspector waved a beckoning hand.

"See here, Sir," he said, turning the rays of his electric torch into the body of the roadster. "See that!"

Mitchell stared at the revolver for several seconds.

It lay just under the gear shift. Putting on his gloves, Mitchell picked it up gingerly.

"Have you handled the revolver, Allen?" he asked.

"No, sir. After the doctor and the nurse came, I returned here and put out the headlights which Miss Baird had left burning; then I saw the revolver lying just there on the floor of the car."

A step behind him caused Mitchell to turn around.

"Hello, what have you there?" asked Ben Potter.

"A revolver." Mitchell held it so that Allen's torch fell directly upon it. "And a revolver which has been recently discharged judging from the smell of burnt powder."

Potter whistled, then bent down for a better look. "By heaven!" he exclaimed. "That's Kitty's revolver. I had her initials engraved upon it—see—"

And turning the revolver slightly, Mitchell was able to decipher the letters on the plate: "K.B."

CHAPTER XVIII

ELUSIVE CLUES

INSPECTOR MITCHELL felt extremely pleased with himself as he hurried along Seventeenth Street in the direction of the Munitions Building. In his interview with Mrs. Augustus Murray of Georgetown, an hour before, he had been unable to shake her confidence in her claim that she had met Major Leigh Wallace leaving the Baird mansion on Sunday afternoon about five minutes past five o'clock. Mrs Murray supplemented her original statement with the information that the Major never had the decency to apologize to her, when he ran against her in his blind haste.

Upon leaving Mrs. Murray, Inspector Mitchell went at once to Major Wallace's boarding house where he learned that he had missed the young officer by ten minutes only.

"He's gone to the Army Dispensary in the Munitions Building for treatment, Mrs. Harris, the landlady, informed him. "Dear knows, I hope the

treatment does him some good. The way he moans in his sleep is something awful."

"Ah, is Major Wallace troubled with insomnia?" asked Mitchell.

"I don't know what he's troubled with." Mrs. Harris was not blessed with an even temper, and when it was aroused generally vented her ill-humor on the first person encountered. "His room is next to mine and the partition is mighty thin. It makes my flesh crawl to hear him moan and when he cries out, 'Kitty!' and again, 'That damned cat,' I just have to pound on the wall and wake him up."

"Perhaps he has an antipathy to cats," remarked Mitchell, restraining a smile.

"Mebbe he has; anyway I can't say that I'm sorry he's going—"

"Going where?"

"Out west somewhere," vaguely. "If you hurry you may catch Major Wallace at the Dispensary; he's usually there about two hours." And taking the broad hint Mitchell bowed himself out of the boarding house.

Unable to secure a taxi-cab at the Dupont Circle stand in place of the police car and Allen, whom he had sent on an errand earlier in the morning, Mitchell boarded a southbound street car and, standing on the forward platform, kept a sharp look-out for Major Wallace. He reached the corner of H Street,

however, without catching up with him, and leaving the car continued on down Seventeenth Street.

So absorbed was Inspcetor Mitchell in his own thoughts that he failed to return Mrs. Parsons' bow as her motor passed him on its way up the street. At a word from Mrs. Parsons, her chauffeur swung the touring car around and up to the curb just as Mitchell started to cross D Street. The sound of his name caused him to glance around and he saw Mrs. Parsons beckoning to him.

"Can I give you a lift, Inspector?" she asked as he approached. "You appear to be in a hurry."

"Thanks." Mitchell wasted no superfluous words but seated himself with alacrity by Mrs. Parsons' side.

"Where to, sir?" questioned the chauffeur, touching his cap as he closed the door.

"Munitions Building—that is," and Mitchell turned inquiringly toward Mrs. Parsons, "if it won't take you out of your way?"

"Not at all," Mrs. Parsons' smile was most engaging. "The car and I are at your service, Inspector. I have no engagements this morning." She paused to wave her hand to the occupants of a passing car, then turned once more to the silent inspector. "Has anything new developed in the Baird murder mystery?"

"Only what was in the morning newspapers," answered Mitchell guardedly.

Mrs. Parsons' gay laugh interrupted him. "I applaud your caution," she said. "The morning newspapers contained no news whatever. Perhaps my question was overstepping etiquette, but how about the other matter about which I consulted you? I mean Edward Rodgers and his erstwhile friend, Major Leigh Wallace. What of them?"

Mitchell considered the pretty widow before replying. Her limpid brown eyes were raised to his with an appealing earnestness that was irresistible.

"I am on my way to see Major Wallace now," he said. "I had hoped to overtake him before he reached the Munitions Building."

"Not by walking, surely," she laughed. "Major Wallace is driving his car to-day and he seldom keeps within the city's speed limit. And to-day was no exception judging from the way he passed me on the way downtown."

"Indeed?" He turned so that he could face her as they talked. "His landlady informed me that Major Wallace plans to leave shortly for the west."

Mrs. Parsons raised her eyebrows in polite surprise. "So soon," she murmured. "How odd! And—" her voice gained in sharpness, "does Edward Rodgers also plan to leave Washington?"

"I don't know what he *had* planned," with quiet

emphasis. "But he is not going anywhere just now."

"Why not?"

"Because he was shot last night."

Mrs. Parsons' convulsive jump almost precipitated her out of the car as the chauffeur made the turn into the street leading to the Munitions Building.

"What—what did you say?" she stammered.

"I did not mean to startle you," Mitchell spoke contritely, alarmed by her pallor. "I thought that you had heard the news."

"I have heard nothing—" she spoke rapidly, clipping her words. "There was nothing in the morning paper—"

"No, we didn't give it out to the press."

"Then how did you expect me to know anything of the shooting?"

"I thought Miss Kitty Baird might have telephoned to you—" Mitchell was watching her closely. "She didn't, eh?"

"No." Mrs. Parsons sat back more comfortably in her car. "Was Mr. Rodgers killed?"

Mitchell shook his head. "Seriously injured," he said soberly. "It's a bad business."

"How did the shooting occur?" she asked. The car had stopped before the lower entrance to the Munitions Building, but Mrs. Parsons motioned to

her chauffeur to wait as he started to open the car door.

"Oh, some one was skylarking in Rock Creek Park and shot Mr. Rodgers as he and Miss Kitty Baird were motoring home last night," explained Mitchell. "Another case of an innocent bystander."

"It *was* an accident, then." Mrs. Parsons raised her scented handkerchief and touched her lips. "I thought—it just occurred to me that he might have tried suicide."

Mitchell regarded her fixedly for a second. "You haven't a great admiration for Edward Rodgers," he remarked dryly. "No, it was *not* a case of suicide." He stepped to the sidewalk. "Thanks very much, Mrs. Parsons, for bringing me down. Good morning."

Mrs. Parsons controlled her impulse to stop him.

"Good morning," she answered, and her voice was honey-sweet, but her chauffeur, happening to meet her glance, quailed at the flash of rage which darkened her eyes and then was gone. " 'Rose Hill,' Perkins." The sharp command caused him to thank his stars that he had left his engine running. Mrs. Parsons' uncertain temper had not endeared her to her servants.

The trip to Georgetown consumed less than ten minutes and Mrs. Parsons had assumed her ordinary expression of tranquil boredom when Perkins

returned with the message that "Miss Baird would be happy to see Mrs. Parsons."

It was the first time Mrs. Parsons had been to call upon Kitty since the murder of her aunt, and she could not repress curious glances about her as she passed Mandy and went into the familiar library. She had hardly seated herself before the sound of a light footstep on the staircase leading down from the gallery into the library caused her to look up and she saw Kitty.

"My dear child!" she exclaimed, advancing with outstretched hands which Kitty grasped while submitting gracefully to the dainty kiss which accompanied her greeting. "My heart aches for you. Your face tells me how you have suffered!" and she traced the dark circles under Kitty's eyes with her finger-tip. "Is there nothing I can do for you?"

Kitty did not reply at once; instead she busied herself in pulling forward a chair. She was given to acting upon impulse and Mrs. Parsons' unexpected appearance clinched a half-formed resolve made in the early hours of the morning while watching by Edward Rodgers' bedside.

"There is something you can do," she said, and her smile was very winning. "Tell me why you wrote a note of warning to Leigh Wallace?"

The question was unexpected and Mrs. Parsons was taken off her guard.

"He showed it to you!" she gasped. "How dared he?"

Kitty watched the color come and go in Mrs. Parsons' white cheeks with interest. It was seldom that the widow showed emotion. "I am waiting for an answer to my question," she reminded her quietly.

"Let Leigh Wallace supply the answer." Mrs. Parsons had herself in hand again. "He can—if he has not already left town."

Kitty did her best to repress a start, but the keen eyes watching her under half-closed lids detected it.

"Suppose we leave Leigh out of the question," Kitty controlled her voice admirably. "Would you rather answer me or the police?"

"The police?" Mrs. Parsons laughed tolerantly. "Dear child, the strain you have been under distorts your ideas. Why the police?"

"Because they are endeavoring to solve the mystery of my aunt's murder." Kitty nothing daunted by the older woman's evasions was determined to fight in the open. "I am convinced, Mrs. Parsons, that Leigh—and you—have a guilty knowledge of that crime."

Only the most astute observer could have translated the swift change in Mrs. Parsons' expression. Even to Kitty's prejudiced ears her low amused laugh rang true.

"You have dug up a mare's nest," Mrs. Parsons replied. "To think that you should consider that I had a hand in poor, dear Miss Susan's death! Why, my dear, it would be insulting if it was not ludicrous."

Kitty flushed with wrath; Mrs. Parsons' ridicule was hard to bear. After all, was the widow right—had she dug up a mare's nest? There was nothing but that note of warning to Leigh Wallace to connect her in the slightest degree with the tragedy.

"Will you tell me to what your note referred," she asked, "if not to my aunt's murder?"

"You overstep my patience." Mrs. Parsons drew herself up with a displeased gesture. "I decline to be questioned further on the subject."

"Miss Baird—" the interruption came from the doorway and both Kitty and her guest whirled around to see a white-capped nurse watching them. "Mr. Rodgers keeps calling for you. Will you come, please?"

"Yes, immediately." Kitty was half way to the door when Mrs. Parsons addressed her with eagerness in her voice.

"Is Mr. Rodgers here?" she asked.

"Yes." Kitty's impatience was marked. "We brought him here after the—the accident. Dr. McLean thought it best not to move him to a hospital. Please don't detain me."

"But, my dear," Mrs. Parsons paused just in front of her. "Are you here alone—unchaperoned?"

"My cousin, Nina Potter, came last night to be with me—"

"Oh, I am relieved," Mrs. Parsons purred out the words. "No one can afford to defy the conventions. If your cousin was not here, I would volunteer myself—"

"Thanks—excuse me, Mrs. Parsons—" The portières opened and closed behind her vanishing figure and Mrs. Parsons found herself alone in the library.

Raising her gold lorgnette Mrs. Parsons took a prolonged survey of the throne-shaped chair standing in its customary place behind the tea table. It required but little stretch of the imagination to visualize Miss Susan Baird presiding over the tea cups, her hawklike nose and piercing eyes. In spite of the warmth of the library, Mrs. Parsons shivered and drew her costly fur coat more closely about her.

With some hesitancy she approached the tea table and scanned the antique silver tea service. She had admired it on many occasions. Taking up the teapot she reversed it and tried to decipher the hall mark; failing to do so she examined first the cream pitcher and then the sugar bowl. As she lowered the bowl, she glanced across the tea table and saw two

large yellow eyes regarding her from the throne-shaped chair.

Mouchette stood in the chair with her fore-paws resting on the table and her fluffy tail was lashing itself into a fury. It was the cat's evident intention to spring upon the table and Mrs. Parsons retreated precipitously. She hated cats. As she passed the table, she dropped the sugar bowl on its polished surface. The bowl skidded, half righted itself, then fell to the floor, the heavy rug deadening the noise. With it went a small object unseen by Mrs. Parsons who, not stopping to pick up the bowl, proceeded into the hall.

Mouchette, surprised by Mrs. Parsons' rapid retreat, stood where she was for an instant, then jumped lightly to the floor and sniffed at the sugar bowl. Going over to the small object lying by the bowl she sniffed at that, stretched out an inquisitive paw, gave it a gentle pat, watched it roll a short distance, then convinced that she had a plaything after her own heart, the cat proceeded to roll it hither and yon.

Mrs. Parsons was making straight for the front door when she caught sight of some one in the parlor, the door of which stood ajar. With a quiet air of authority she entered the room. So silently did she move that not until Nina Potter turned away from the Florentine cabinet was she aware of Mrs.

Parsons' presence. The ivory chessman which she held slipped from her fingers and shattered on the hardwood floor.

"Oh, what a pity!" Mrs. Parsons' air of concern sat prettily upon her. "My dear Nina, did I startle you? I am so distressed."

"You did," admitted Nina with a rueful smile. "The quinine I have taken for my cold has made me quite deaf. Does Kitty know that you are here?"

"I have just seen her," Mrs. Parsons selected a chair and motioned Nina to one beside it. She did not propose to have her call cut short. She had found her source of information. "Kitty had to go upstairs to be with Edward Rodgers. When did the shooting occur?"

"Late last night." Nina moved uneasily; she knew Mrs. Parsons' predilection for scandal.

"And where—" with gentle insistence.

"In Rock Creek Park." Nina's hoarse voice rasped Mrs. Parsons' ears. She was sensitive to sound. "Ben was here when Kitty returned with Ted Rodgers, and he came right home and brought me back to stay with Kitty."

Mrs. Parsons eyed her in silence, noting every detail of her pretty morning dress as well as the unusual redness of her eyelids and the nervous twitching of her hands.

"How fortunate for you," she exclaimed. Nina

looked up and caught her eyes; for a moment their glances held, then Nina looked away.

"I don't catch your meaning," she faltered.

"No?"—with a rising inflection which implied doubt, and Nina blushed painfully. Mrs. Parsons avoided looking at her; instead she inspected the furniture in the parlor and shuddered. "Such taste in decoration," she said calmly. "But then Kitty can change all that with the fortune Miss Susan Baird left to her. What a sensation the news of her wealth has made in Washington! Has no one asked *you* how Miss Baird acquired it?"

Nina's color slowly ebbed away. The eyes she turned on Mrs. Parsons were like some hunted animal.

"You—you know?" she stammered.

Mrs. Parsons nodded her head.

"Confide in me, my dear Nina," she spoke with a world of sympathy in voice and manner. "I know that I can aid you."

CHAPTER XIX

SUSPICION

IT was not often that Charles Craige was late in keeping an appointment with Mrs. Parsons. But the pretty widow had occasion to glance repeatedly at her parlor clock with ever increasing annoyance before she heard the butler ushering some one upstairs. She masked her displeasure under a smiling face.

"Ah, Charles, what has detained you?" she asked, as he bent low over her hand and kissed it.

"Pressing business," he answered. "I am deeply sorry to be late, Cecelia. Judge McMasters simply would not hurry. Has Ben Potter been here?"

"Not to-day." Mrs. Parsons' surprise at the question was manifest. "You know he is not one of my favorites. He bored me to death in San Francisco; he is so intense—" she shrugged her shoulders. "I saw his wife this morning."

"Indeed?" Craige selected a cigarette from the box on the table and accepted a lighted match.

"Silly sentimental little fool," commented Mrs. Parsons. "Just the kind of wife Ben could have been counted on to pick out."

"Men usually marry to please themselves." Craige laughed. "Ben telephoned me an hour ago and said that he was coming around to see you—"

"What about?"

"He did not state." Craige looked at her in surprise, abruptness was not usual with her. "He may come at any moment—" glancing at his watch. It lacked five minutes of the hour. "I stopped at the bank this morning and President Walsh said he would accept your note for two thousand dollars provided you have collateral—"

"Certainly." Mrs. Parsons colored deeply. "In fact, I am not sure that I shall need the loan from the bank. I was only temporarily embarrassed until my property in San Francisco is sold. To-day," she paused, "I have arranged another matter satisfactorily. It is kind of you, Charles, very kind, to handle my business for me."

"My dearest Cecelia—" Craige laid his hand on her's. "I am happiest when I serve you."

Her eyes sparkled with a hint of tears. "I am grateful," she murmured. "You have been so good, so very good since I came to Washington."

"Cecelia!" Craige bent forward impulsively, but she drew away from his embrace.

"Not now, dear," she protested. "You know you promised—"

Craige's handsome face, alight with eagerness, altered. "I will keep my word—" he said. "One month, Cecelia, and then the whole world is to know of my happiness—"

"Our happiness—" she corrected softly. Craige caught her hands and pressed the palms against his face before kissing them with lingering tenderness.

"A la bonne heure!" he exclaimed, and his voice betrayed his happiness. "Cecelia, you grow prettier every day."

"My mirror is not so kind as you, Charles!" A sigh accompanied the words, and she swiftly changed the subject. "Have you seen Kitty Baird to-day?"

"I am on my way there now." A worried look crossed his face. "That poor girl seems fated for tragedy. You heard of the attempt to kill Ted Rodgers last night in the Park, did you not?"

"I understood that it was an accident." Horror crept into Mrs. Parsons' eyes. "How dreadful!"

"Kitty declares that the headlights of the car blinded her, and that she has no idea of the identity of the person who did the shooting. She says that

she could not even tell whether it was a man or a woman."

Craige, sitting facing the light from the western window, failed to detect the faint alteration in Mrs. Parsons' expression.

"How is Ted Rodgers?" she asked. "Out of danger?"

"I haven't heard; which reminds me that I am to meet Dr. McLean at 'Rose Hill' at three o'clock." Craige rose. "I sincerely hope that Ted recovers—it will kill Kitty if anything happens to him."

Mrs. Parsons held out her hands and Craige helped her slowly to her feet. "So Ted really has cut out Leigh Wallace in Kitty's affections," she remarked.

Craige frowned. "It was nothing more than a flirtation between Kitty and Wallace," he declared. "Her whole heart is centered on Ted."

"You speak with positiveness—" Mrs. Parsons' laugh held a touch of malice. "Remember, women are fickle—and Leigh very attractive."

"I fail to understand the fascination he apparently has for women." Craige's tone was stiff. A mischievous smile touched Mrs. Parsons' lips and her eyes danced.

"Leigh was very, very smitten with Kitty," she asserted, as she paused before the long gilt mirror and adjusted her lorgnette chain. "Do you suppose

it could have been Leigh who tried to kill Ted last night?"

Craige stood just behind her and looking in the mirror she saw his face reflected over her shoulder. His expression of surprise gave place to doubt—to wonder—

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "No, it can't be, Cecelia. Leigh, whatever his faults, is the type of man who fights in the open."

"Jealousy changes a man's nature sometimes," she murmured. "Leigh has not been himself since his return from France."

"You knew him before, then?"

Mrs. Parsons nodded. "Very slightly. It was Nina Potter who commented upon the change in him; he was an old sweetheart of hers."

Craige paused. "Upon my word, Cecelia," he ejaculated. "How do you learn so much about people?"

She laughed aloud in her amusement. "I am observant. I find—" and the lines about her mouth hardened—"it pays to be. Will you dine with me to-morrow night, Charles?"

"Surely," with eager haste. "And will you go to the theater afterward?"

"Perhaps." She laid her hand for the fraction of a second against his cheek with a caressing motion.

"Careful, dear, James is waiting to open the door for you—" and Craige perforce contented himself with a formal handshake as the servant came forward to the foot of the short flight of steps with his overcoat and hat.

Craige was about to step into his motor when he became aware that the butler was at his elbow.

"Can I have a word with you, sir?" he asked, and a jerk of his thumb indicated Craige's chauffeur. "In private, sir."

"Certainly, James." Mystified by the butler's air of secretiveness Craige followed him a few steps down the street. When convinced that the chauffeur could not overhear them, James halted. But they were not destined to have their interview in private, for as Craige stood waiting for James to explain what he wished Inspector Mitchell stopped beside them.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Craige," he said, as he nodded a greeting to the butler. "Glad to see you, sir. Now, James, why did you send for me?"

James rubbed his hands together and cast an appealing look at Craige. "I had to," he began, addressing his remarks to him rather than to Mitchell. "My conscience couldn't rest easy, sir, after I read the newspapers about the inquest."

"The inquest?" Mitchell's eyes snapped with ex-

citement. "Go on, man—you mean the Baird inquest?"

"Yes. Mr. Craige, sir, the newspapers said that Miss Baird was killed by poison put on a peach," he spoke in nervous haste and Craige had some difficulty in catching what he said. "Nobody seemed to know where the peaches came from 'cording to the papers."

"No more we did," prompted Mitchell. "Well, what then?"

James licked his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Miss Kitty Baird goes to the market sometimes for Mrs. Parsons, sir. On Saturday she brought back some California peaches," his voice sank even lower. "She called here Sunday morning, and when she left, the peaches wasn't on the dining room table."

Craige stared the butler out of countenance. "Preposterous!" he exclaimed, turning red with indignation. "What are you suggesting, James?"

"Nothing, sir, Mr. Craige. I'm just telling you about the peaches."

Craige's face was a study of wrath and bewilderment; the former predominating. With an effort, he checked an oath and instead drew out some loose silver.

"I am glad you spoke only to us, James," he said. "Come with me, Mitchell," and paying no attention

to the inspector's protests that he wished further word with the butler, he hurried him toward his car.

So occupied were both men that neither caught James' furtive glance at the parlor window as he turned to reënter Mrs. Parsons' house.

CHAPTER XX

THE FEET OF THE FURTIVE

MANDY was not happy in her mind. No matter how tempting the dishes she cooked, her beloved "Miss Kitty" failed to eat more than "jes' scraps," as Mandy expressed it in her disgust. But Kitty's heart as well as her thoughts were centered in the sickroom and she did not linger elsewhere. Weakened through loss of blood and shock, Ted Rodgers had lain partly conscious all through the morning, taking no interest in his surroundings and only rousing when Kitty spoke to him. But even to her he addressed no conversation, being content to hold her hand and gaze at her with his heart in his eyes.

"Do go and lie down, Miss Baird." Miss Grey, the trained nurse, laid a sympathetic hand on Kitty's shoulder. "I assure you Mr. Rodgers is better, and I promise to call you the moment Dr. McLean gets here."

Kitty stretched her cramped muscles and looked at Ted. Even to her inexperienced eyes, he appeared to be resting more comfortably and his cheeks were a healthier color. She felt inexplicably weary; her eyelids were heavy from lack of sleep and her head ached unmercifully. Taking care not to arouse Rodgers, Kitty moved away from the bedside.

"I'll be in the room," she told Miss Gray, lowering her voice, "just across the hall, and I will leave my door open. If you want the slightest thing just call me, and I will come at once."

Kitty's desire for "forty winks," as her aunt had always termed her afternoon nap, was not to be gratified immediately, for as she stepped into the hall, Mandy came toiling up the stairs.

"Law, ma'am, Miss Kitty!" she ejaculated. "Dis hyar day am gwine to be de ruination of me. I wish that no-count nigger, Oscar, was hyar attendin' to his work."

"I wish so, too!" echoed Kitty fervently. "Have you had word from Oscar?"

"No, m'm." Mandy had a habit of mumbling her words. "Whar's Mrs. Potter?"

"I'm sure I don't know." Kitty yawned. "In the library, probably."

"No she ain't, neither!" Mandy's exasperation was gaining the upper hand. "Thar's been two tele-

phone calls fo' her, an' I 'spects Mister Ben'll jump clear through his skin if she don't come an' talk to him."

"Is Mr. Ben on the 'phone now?"

"Yessim."

"I'll talk to him on the branch 'phone." Kitty crossed the hall. "You might see if Mrs. Potter is lying down in the boudoir."

The telephone instrument was close by the door and Kitty, who had earlier in the day deadened the sound of the bell by stuffing cotton about it, so that its ring might not disturb Rodgers, took off the receiver. No masculine voice answered her low hail, and finally, convinced that her cousin must have grown tired and rung off, she hung up the receiver. Going over to her bed she threw herself fully dressed upon it, and in a few minutes her even breathing showed that she had fallen into the heavy slumber of utter exhaustion.

Mandy, left to her own devices, wandered down the hall to the boudoir. It was located next to the bedroom which had belonged to Miss Susan Baird. The old colored woman cautiously poked her head inside the door sufficiently for to convince herself that the boudior was empty, then withdrew. She stood for some seconds before the closed door leading into "Miss Susan's" bedroom, but her superstitious dread kept her from entering it. Had she

done so she would have found the object of her search.

Nina Potter, her ear close to the key-hole of the door, heard Mandy stump heavily away and drew a long, long breath of relief. Getting up from her knees, she looked about the room. It had been left untouched since the funeral, Mandy not having found courage either to dust or sweep, or, for the matter of that, to enter it upon any occasion whatever, in spite of Kitty's directions to put the bedroom in order.

It was a large room with high ceilings and diamond-paned windows. The shades were raised and the afternoon sunshine fell full upon the carved four-post bedstead with its time-worn canopy and broad valance. Going over to the bureau, Nina tried the different drawers; they were all unlocked. Turning once again to convince herself that she really was alone in the room, she waited a second and then went through the bureau with neatness and dispatch. Her search was unproductive of result. Nothing daunted, she examined the old desk with equal thoroughness, and then turned her attention to the mahogany wardrobe which occupied one corner of the room. She found that it contained nothing but clothes which a generation before had been fashionable. They hung on the wooden pegs, rainbow hued, beribboned, and musty. Nina hastily

closed the doors and turned her back on the wardrobe.

The action brought her face to face with the bedstead. It was the only piece of furniture in the room which she had not examined. With some hesitancy she walked over to it. The sheets had been spread neatly over the mattress, but the bolster and pillows had evidently been tossed in place, for they had assumed grotesque shapes and to her excited imagination it seemed as if some human form lay sprawled across the bed.

Raising the sheets, she ran her hands back and forth over the mattress as far as she could reach. No rustle of papers, such as she had hoped to hear, resulted. Looking about, she spied the short wooden steps which Miss Susan Baird had used to mount into bed every night, and dragged them into place. Standing on the top step and resting her weight partly on the bed, Nina managed to feel the whole surface of the mattress.

Finally, she straightened her aching figure and stood upright. She was conscious of a slight feeling of giddiness; the next instant she had lost her balance and rolled to the floor. As she descended she threw out her hand and instinctively clutched the valance. It ripped away with a tearing sound, and when she sat up, bewildered, her eyes were on a level with the wooden springs of the bed. Between

turned thoughtfully away just as Leigh Wallace took the package from Nina Potter.

Kitty, awakened from her sleep by Ben Potter's unceremonious entrance into her bedroom, was gazing at her cousin in utter bewilderment.

"What are you saying?" she demanded for the second time.

"That your revolver was found by Inspector Mitchell on the floor of Ted Rodgers' car," repeated Potter. He made no attempt to modify his angry tones and his voice carried through the open door and across the hall into Ted Rodgers' bedroom.

"You are mad!" exclaimed Kitty. "My revolver is here in my desk." Springing up she hastened to her antique secretary and pulled open one of the drawers. It was empty.

"The revolver was here yesterday," she cried.

"And last night in Ted's car," reiterated Potter, with stubborn temper. "Your revolver—and one chamber had been recently discharged and Ted Rodgers nearly killed."

As his words echoed across the hall Miss Gray, the trained nurse, closed the bedroom door and turned to look at her patient. With feeble strength he struggled upright.

"Bring me my clothes," Ted Rodgers gasped, as she hurried to his side.

CHAPTER XXI

MOUCHETTE, THE SEVEN-TOED

WHEN Nina Potter reëntered the library a few minutes later she found Charles Craige playing with the Angora cat, Mouchette. With a word of greeting she moved over to the fire and held out her hands before the blaze. Craige, who had risen at sight of her, observed her effort to avoid his gaze.

"I feel chilled," she confessed, and a shiver shook her from head to foot.

"You have a bad cold," Craige remarked. "Was it wise to linger in the garden—?"

Nina, intent on her own thoughts, never noticed the gravity of his manner.

"Perhaps not," she admitted absently. "I should have remembered my coat. Where is Kitty?"

"Upstairs, I imagine. Your husband went to find her."

"Ben!" Nina whirled around. "Ben—here?"

"Look out, you will scorch yourself," Craige stepped hastily toward her. "Don't stand so near the fire."

"I am in no danger—" but Nina drew away from the fireplace with a paler face. "How long have you been in the library, Mr. Craige?"

"About ten minutes."

"Was Ben here with you?"

"I found him here when I arrived. Do sit down, Mrs. Potter, you look utterly fagged," and Craige wheeled forward a chair. As she still remained standing he started to remonstrate, but the words died on his lips as Kitty came into the room, followed by Ben Potter.

"Thank heaven you are here," she cried, running to her godfather's side. "You will bring Ben to his senses."

Potter walked up to them, his eyes ablaze with anger. "I've told her a few plain truths," he stated. His truculent manner made anything but an agreeable impression on Craige, who viewed him with contempt. He had no use for bullies.

"Stop shouting, Ben," he remarked cuttingly. "You forget you are addressing your cousin and your wife."

Nina moved slightly to one side and looked at her husband. Upon his entrance she had shrunk behind Craige. The movement had been instinctive.

"Why are you so excited, dear?" she asked, timidly.

Potter avoided her gaze and addressed Craige.

"I'm tired of mysteries," he declared. "First, Cousin Susan is murdered, brutally murdered, poor old lady; then my friend, Ted Rodgers, is shot while driving in his own car with Kitty—and Kitty's revolver, with one chamber discharged, is found in the car. Damn it!" His teeth clenched together. "It's time the police took action."

"We will, never worry—" Inspector Mitchell, who had been an interested spectator of the scene from the doorway, stepped inside the library, his face set and stern. "Allow me to conduct this investigation in my own way, Mr. Potter. Stand aside, sir." He turned to address some one in the hall. "Welsh, go tell Major Wallace that he will find Miss Baird here and not in the parlor."

"Wallace!" Potter faced about. "Is he still hanging around here? Why don't you throw him out?"

"Major Wallace has a perfect right to come here if he wishes to." Kitty spoke with warmth. "How dare you, Ben, dictate who shall call here and who shall not? This is my house."

"Is it?" Potter had lashed himself into a fury—a fury apparently intensified by the arrival of Leigh Wallace, for he turned and shook his fist at the young officer. "As your nearest of kin, Kitty, I insist that your aunt's wishes be carried out and that you shall not receive Wallace again. She knew

what character of man he is—and that knowledge was the cause of her death."

Craige stepped forward. "Are you aware of what you are saying, Ben?" he asked. "That you virtually accuse Major Wallace of killing Miss Susan Baird?"

"Sure." Potter laughed recklessly. "Miss Baird had proof of his treachery—"

"Treachery? To whom?" Craige's hand on Kitty's shoulder warned her to be silent as he shot his questions at the distraught naturalist.

"To Kitty—playing fast and loose with her affections, and holding clandestine meetings with—" Potter licked his dry mouth, while his eyes, inflamed with hate, rested on Wallace's white face, "with my wife."

"You lie!" The denial rang out clearly. Only Inspector Mitchell's powerful arm prevented Wallace from springing on Potter. "You d—mn scoundrel, to blacken your wife's name."

"Stop! Stop!" Nina Potter wrung her hands. "You are both mad!"

"This scene has gone far enough!" Craige spoke with authority. His calmness brought some comfort to Kitty—they were not all losing their heads! "Quiet, Potter. Now, Mitchell, what have you to say?"

Inspector Mitchell surveyed the small circle with

critical eyes. He noted Nina Potter, standing white-faced and terror-stricken, her gaze riveted on her infuriated husband. Kitty, bewilderment struggling with dawning horror as she stared at her cousin and his young wife and then at Wallace, had sunk down on the nearest chair. Wallace, his eyes downcast, stood swaying on his feet. Mitchell glanced at Craige and pointed slightly to Wallace. It was plain to both men that the young officer had been drinking.

"Suppose we sit down," Mitchell indicated the chairs about the tea table, and taking their consent for granted, deliberately seated himself. With some hesitancy, Potter followed his example and Wallace did so mechanically. Nina Potter, her feet dragging as she stumbled nearer, half fell into an armchair and Craige took the vacant one by Kitty's side.

"Draw up," Mitchell directed. "I will lay my cards on the table—and then, Mr. Potter," as the naturalist started to speak, "we'll hear what you have to say. Until then, keep quiet."

Mitchell spoke in a tone which commanded respect and Potter sullenly obeyed him. The silence remained unbroken for a tense moment, then the portières were drawn aside and Welsh, the plain clothes detective, stuck his head inside the library.

"Mrs. Parsons," he announced, and drew back to let her enter.

Half way across the library the pretty widow paused and inspected the company assembled around the tea table in astonishment.

"My dear Kitty," she said, dropping her lorgnette. "I stopped only for a minute," she hesitated. "I fear I am *de trop,*" and she turned to leave.

"Not a bit of it." Mitchell spoke so quickly that Kitty, who had risen, had no opportunity to answer Mrs. Parsons. The instinct of courtesy gained ascendancy over her perturbed spirit, and she offered her chair to the pretty widow. "Join us here, Mrs. Parsons," added Mitchell. "We want your advice."

Mrs. Parsons' smile was charming, but her eyes were keenly alert as she moved forward, searching each face for a clue to the scene which she felt she had interrupted. Not observing where she was going, she stepped on something soft. A loud wail from Mouchette caused her to start convulsively, and the Angora cat, switching her injured tail, back and forth, sprang on Kitty's vacant chair and from there to the tea table.

"That cat is always under my feet, horrid beast!" Mrs. Parsons, conscious of appearing ridiculous, for Wallace had not restrained a chuckle, spoke with irritation.

"Let me help you," and Craige, who with the other men had risen on the widow's entrance, assisted her in removing her wrap.

Mrs. Parsons presented an alluring picture in her chic crêpe de Chine calling costume, its soft folds showing her graceful figure to advantage. Mrs. Parsons, with reason, was vain of her neck and arms and generally wore elbow sleeves and square cut neck. She was making a round of visits, and as she removed her long white gloves, she laid her gold card case and mesh bag before her on the tea table.

Mouchette eyed them for a second and then put out an inquisitive paw. Mrs. Parsons promptly drew both bag and card case out of the cat's reach. Craige, who missed nothing the widow either said or did, lifted Mouchette off the table and held her on his knee. He was aware of Mrs. Parsons' fear of cats. Mouchette submitted to his petting with good grace and much purring, and finally curled up in his lap, but her yellow eyes never ceased watching Mrs. Parsons.

"Is this a séance?" asked Mrs. Parsons as the silence continued. "If not," her eyebrows lifted, "why are we sitting around this table?"

"We are waiting for Inspector Mitchell to, as he expressed it, 'lay his cards on the table,'" Potter spoke with a sneer. "In other words, Cecelia, you are in at the death."

Mrs. Parsons' slight start was lost on all but Craige.

"Drop the melodrama, Ben," he said. "We pre-

fer to listen to Inspector Mitchell and not to you. Go on, Inspector."

But the Inspector was doomed to another interruption, for as he hitched his chair closer to Nina Potter, the sound of footsteps in the gallery circling the library drew all eyes upward. With the aid of his nurse, Ted Rodgers was making his way down the gallery steps with faltering speed.

"Don't any one rise," he begged, as they started to their feet. Kitty was the first to reach his side.

"Ted, is this wise, dear?" she asked, making no attempt to conceal her anxiety. "How could you let him get up, Miss Gray?"

"She couldn't help herself." Rodgers gently but firmly disengaged his hand from Kitty's tender clasp. "Go and sit down, dear; I'll take this chair."

Miss Gray aided him in pulling out the throne-shaped chair. By tacit consent the others had avoided sitting in it. As Rodgers sank back, the bandage on his head showed up plainly. Leigh Wallace transferred his gaze elsewhere. Vividly before him had loomed the memory of Miss Susan lying dead in her throne-shaped chair on Monday morning. Rodgers' complexion matched the dead woman's in pallor. His exertions had made him deadly faint and it was some seconds before he could gather his strength to speak with clearness.

"Don't wait, Miss Gray," he said courteously.

"They will call you if I need your aid. Thank you." Then as the nurse withdrew, he turned to Inspector Mitchell. "Well, what news?"

"Miss Baird," Mitchell cleared his throat and pointed to a typewritten manuscript which he had lain before him on the table just as Rodgers joined them. "You quarreled with your aunt on Sunday—"

"We had an argument, I admit—" Kitty rubbed one nervous hand over the other—they were both cold.

"It was more than an argument—it was a quarrel, and about Major Leigh Wallace," Mitchell's manner was dictatorial. "Don't contradict me, madam, I know."

"Well, what else do you know?" demanded Craige, losing patience. "What's that document you have there, Mitchell?"

"All in good time, sir." Mitchell's smile was tantalizing. "You went out of here, Miss Baird, in a rage, because your aunt had ordered you not to return. Can you deny it?"

"N—no."

"Stop a moment," Craige held up his hand. "You are not obliged to answer these questions, Kitty, except in a law court. Don't overstep your authority, Mitchell."

Mitchell's only answer was to shrug his heavy

shoulders, and look across the table at Kitty. "Miss Baird," he began. "You purchased some peaches for Mrs. Parsons on Saturday—"

She looked at him dumbly. Then at Mrs. Parsons, who gazed back at her in silent astonishment. "I bought some fruit for her on Saturday," she admitted. "But if there were any peaches in the basket, they were there unknown to me."

Mitchell smiled significantly. "Pretty thin," he commented, and glanced over at Craige, before again addressing her. "You stopped to see Mrs. Parsons on Sunday morning, Miss Baird—and you brought those peaches home to your aunt."

"I did not!" Kitty's voice rang out clearly. "I was at Mrs. Parsons' for a few minutes on Sunday on my way from church—"

"With Major Wallace?"

Kitty changed color. "Yes."

"And Major Wallace went into the house with you?"

Kitty paused in uncertainty and her eyes sought Wallace. He sat lolling back in his chair, his air of indifference plainly assumed as his restless fingers played with the catch of Mrs. Parsons' gold mesh bag.

"I went upstairs to see Mrs. Parsons," she explained. "I left Major Wallace standing in the vestibule—"

"And the front door open—" Mitchell broke in rudely. He turned to Mrs. Parsons. "Your house is an English basement, with the drawing room on the second floor. Where is your dining room?"

"On the first floor." Mrs. Parsons had been following the dialogue with unwavering attention. At her answer Mitchell nodded his head with an air of triumph.

"I'll amend my statement, Miss Baird," he said. "You did not carry those peaches home to your aunt, but Major Wallace did—when he called here to see her alone on Sunday afternoon."

Wallace's air of indifference dropped from him and he swung to his feet, his hands clenched. "You're a damned liar!" he shouted.

"Shouting won't help matters," Mitchell remarked. "For I have the goods on you." He tapped the papers in front of him. "Here is the sworn testimony of Mrs. Murray, who saw you enter this house on Sunday afternoon with a paper package under your arm, and when you left you carried no package and were so agitated that you weren't even conscious of bumping into Mrs. Murray as you hurried down the street toward Washington."

Wallace stared at the Inspector and then at the others, but always his eyes passed over Nina Potter, sitting huddled in her chair, her eyes upraised in mute pleading.

"Well," his voice was hoarse—discordant. "What if I did bring some peaches to Miss Susan as a 'peace offering?'" His lips twitched into a ghastly smile. "It doesn't follow that I murdered her."

"No—?" Mitchell's tone expressed incredulity. "That's for the jury to decide." He looked across at Kitty. "You I charge with being an accessory to the crime."

Charles Craige was the first to speak. "You bring a serious charge against my godchild," he said sternly. "I demand your proof."

Mitchell turned slightly to address the man on his left. "How about it, Mr. Potter?" he asked.

Potter seemed to have some difficulty in speaking, for a moment elapsed before he answered.

"Kitty spent Sunday night with us," he began. "I came home late, having been detained at my club, and was surprised to see Kitty walk out of my apartment house and jump into Major Wallace's car—"

He got no further. Kitty was on her feet, her face scarlet.

"You saw me?" she cried. "Me!"

"Yes," meeting her gaze unwaveringly. "I recognized your red coat." He paused, then added slowly, "I followed you to Georgetown and saw you enter this house—"

Kitty dropped back in her chair as if shot. Her

eyes wandered from Nina Potter, sitting with head averted, to Wallace, who stared straight in front of him, and then to Ted Rodgers, who sat with closed eyes, his head resting against the high back of the throne-shaped chair. No one broke the tense silence and after a brief pause Mitchell spoke.

"You got your aunt's fortune, Miss Baird—and then you got cold feet—" he paused dramatically. "There was one man who suspected you, and so you tried to do away with him. I found your revolver, with one chamber discharged in the bottom of Mr. Rodgers' car—"

"So I have heard," Kitty's fighting spirit was coming to her aid. It had conquered her feeling of deadly faintness, and she faced them, white-lipped but with blazing eyes. "And who was with you, Inspector, when you made that discovery?"

"My chauffeur and Mr. Potter."

"Is that so?" Kitty's smile was peculiar as she glanced at her cousin. "Has it occurred to you that it may be manufactured evidence?"

Mitchell looked at her in astonishment. "Are you accusing your cousin of lying?"

"He is accusing me of a far more despicable crime," she retorted. "Of wilfully aiding in the murder of my aunt, of trying to kill the man whom, last night, I promised to marry—" she faced them proudly, her heart beating with suffocating rapidity.

Why, why had not Ted Rodgers spoken in her defense? "Mr. Rodgers," she went on, after an almost imperceptible pause, "was shot by a person riding in a car which passed us when we were driving in Rock Creek Park last night. When I left this house with Mr. Rodgers, my revolver was upstairs in the drawer of my desk—" Again she paused, finding speech difficult—her throat felt parched and dry. "Upon my return I found not only you waiting for me, Inspector Mitchell, but Mr. Potter. My cousin knew where I kept my revolver; it was no secret. He could easily have slipped upstairs during the confusion of getting Mr. Rodgers to bed and sending for a nurse and doctor, secured my revolver and, unknown to you, dropped it in Mr. Rodgers' car—for the purpose of incriminating me."

"And Mr. Potter's object in doing that?" questioned Mitchell, as she came to a breathless pause.

"Ask him—" and Kitty pointed to her cousin, who had half risen, then dropped back in his chair. Mitchell stared at them both for a second, then faced the throne-shaped chair.

"Can you tell us who shot you, Mr. Rodgers?" he asked.

Rodgers opened his eyes and faced their concentrated attention.

"Miss Baird," he commenced, and Kitty almost cried out at the formality of his address, "has told

you how the revolver might have been 'planted' in my car to incriminate her. To be exact it was thrown into the car by the person who shot me, and with it a handkerchief." He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a piece of linen, bloodstained and torn. "You bound my head, did you not, before you started to drive me home?" turning to Kitty.

"Yes."

"My nurse—" Rodgers was speaking more clearly, "showed me the handkerchiefs which Dr. McLean had removed to put on a proper bandage," touching his head. "Look at that handkerchief, Mitchell—and tell us what you see."

Mitchell spread out the costly linen so that all could view it.

"A woman's handkerchief," he remarked. "There's an initial in the corner—the letter—" holding it closer—"the letter 'P.'" In the utter stillness that followed he laid down the handkerchief. "'P,'" he repeated musingly—"Potter."

A cry escaped Nina Potter and she shrank back in her chair, her face buried in her hands, shaking from head to foot. "Not that," she gasped. "Not that!"

Ted Rodgers bent forward. "'P' stands as well for 'Parsons,'" he commented, and got no further.

"Yo'se done said it!" gasped a voice behind them, and Oscar, perspiration trickling down his black

face, came forward, his arm tightly clutched by Welsh, the plain clothes' detective. "Dar's de woman who done up ole Miss," shaking his fist in Mrs. Parsons' face. "I see'd her acreepin' away from here on Monday mawnin,' an'—"

"You—you—Oscar!" Mrs. Parsons' voice rose and cracked. Again she tried to speak in her natural tones—"Oscar!"

Kitty cried out—a chord of memory had been touched—

"It was you I heard trying to bribe Oscar!" she exclaimed. "You!"

Mrs. Parsons turned with livid face to Charles Craige.

"Charles—they—she—stop her!" She reeled backward and Craige, awakening from his stupor, flung Mouchette toward Kitty and reached forward to catch Mrs. Parsons as she swayed dangerously near the edge of her chair.

The Angora cat, roused suddenly from her sleep, missed Kitty by the fraction of an inch and alighted in Mrs. Parsons' lap. As the terrified woman attempted to throw her down, the cat sank her claws into her bare arm, tearing the delicate flesh with gash after gash.

The men sprang to Mrs. Parsons' aid, but too late. Her screams gave place to a gurgling cry and she sank back a dead weight. Mitchell, kneeling by

her side, stared at her convulsed features in horror as his hand went to her wrist.

"By God! She's dead!" he gasped in awe. His glance traveled downward. "Look—look at the cat!" His shaking finger pointed to where Mouchette sat licking first one paw and then the other. A streak of blood was flowing from where she had gashed herself in her fury. Suddenly they saw the cat stiffen, throw back her head convulsively, roll over and lie still.

A clicking sound caused Inspector Mitchell to whirl around in time to see a pair of handcuffs dangling from Charles Craige's wrists.

"What—what?" he gasped.

"Charles Craige—murderer of Miss Susan Baird," explained Rodgers. "Don't move," and a revolver rested dangerously near Craige's heart. "Open your hand." The command was accompanied by a threatening movement of the revolver.

Slowly, very slowly Craige did as he was told. A small rubber bulb syringe dropped to the floor.

"Don't touch it," Rodgers cried sharply, as Mitchell bent down. "It is filled with the poison which Craige sprayed on the cat's paw—and thus killed Cecelia Parsons, his fiancée."

CHAPTER XXII

GREED

CHARLES CRAIGE sat staring into vacancy, while beads of perspiration trickled down his ghastly face. Several drops slipped into his eyes and half blinded him. Raising his hands he brushed them away. The action brought the handcuffs encircling his wrists into view. He regarded them apathetically, then his uncomprehending gaze traveled over the horror-stricken men and women grouped about his chair. It was not until he saw Kitty Baird that the situation dawned upon him. Before the others suspected his intention, he sprang at her, his manacled hands upraised to strike. The blow was turned aside by Inspector Mitchell, who darted to Kitty's assistance.

"Hold him down in that chair, Welsh," he directed as the detective came to his aid. Rodgers, whose false strength had departed, dropped into the nearest chair, the revolver hanging useless in his grasp. His shot, as Craige sprang forward, had gone wild. Kitty was by his side in an instant.

"I'm all right," he panted, as she bent over him. "Don't worry, my darling. Now, Craige, what have you to say?"

"Say?" Craige was winded from his exertions and spoke with difficulty. "Why should I say anything?"

"Because the game's up," Mitchell stated, and stepped aside so that Craige had a clear view of Cecelia Parsons. "Why did you kill that woman?"

"I did not mean to kill Cecelia," Craige shouted. "God knows I did not." His bloodshot eyes again sought Kitty. "I threw the cat at you. Cecelia called to me to stop you—"

"Ah, so Mrs. Parsons aided you in your murder of Miss Susan Baird," broke in Mitchell.

"She did not." Craige, his tongue unloosened, spoke in desperate haste, his words tripping over one another. It seemed almost as if he gained courage from the sound of his own voice. "Miss Susan Baird was warned—but she would not listen to me."

"Why did you kill my aunt?" demanded Kitty, indignation for the moment mastering her horror. "She was always kind to you. She trusted you."

"Trust? It was greed which prompted her friendship." Craige laughed harshly, jeeringly. "It was by my aid that she made her fortune. Do you know

what she was—your aristocratic aunt—a money-lender!"

Kitty stared at him—appalled. "It can't be," she cried, and turned appealingly to Ted Rodgers. "Make him tell the truth."

"I am speaking the truth," Craige retorted. "Many's the person I've brought over here when you, Kitty, were not around, and your aunt has admitted us at that side door. She charged high rates of interest, but no one gave her away. She was square with them."

"Were you square with her?" asked Rodgers quietly, and a dull red suffused Craige's white face.

"When I had to borrow, she treated me like the others," he answered. "The fact that I helped her amass a fortune cut no ice. I got deeper and deeper in debt, and then—" his voice changed. "I had to have money, so I told her I wanted to marry you."

Kitty retreated, aghast. "Marry me? *You!*"

"Yes," coolly. "I am only fifty-four; there is not such a difference in our ages. I saw your aunt on Sunday about six o'clock. She laughed at me and refused to consent to our marriage." Beads of perspiration had again gathered on his forehead, but he went steadily on with his story, oblivious apparently of the abhorrance with which his companions were regarding him. "I had forged Miss Susan Baird's name in my desperation last week. I knew that if

Kitty and I were married quickly, she would keep quiet about the forgery for her family's sake. When she laughed my plan to scorn, I realized there was only one thing to do—to kill her."

"How did you go about it?" asked Mitchell.

It was some seconds before Craige answered. "I went prepared for failure," he admitted. "I could not face ruin—perhaps the penitentiary for forgery. My father was a famous expert in toxicology and," he moistened his lips—"I often worked in his laboratory," with a side glance at the bulb syringe still lying where it had fallen on the floor. "I at first planned to squeeze some poison in her tea cup, but got no chance. Then Miss Baird asked me to peel a peach for her. I don't know where the peaches came from, but there were three in a dish on the table. Before cutting the peach in two, I sprayed some hydrocyanic acid on the knife blade when Miss Baird was not looking, holding the knife just over the edge of the table and the bulb in my left hand, out of sight in my lap."

"It was devilishly ingenious," commented Mitchell. "Well, did you steal the forged paper after killing the old lady?"

"No." Craige looked at Kitty with a faint sneer. "It was among those canceled checks from the bank which you so obligingly left in your desk yesterday

alongside your revolver. I stole them both last night."

"Last night?" Kitty looked at him in astonishment. "Why, we found you at home last night, Ted and I. We telephoned you first that we were coming and—"

"I answered the 'phone; quite so." Craige's smile was peculiar. "My butler, Lambert, is well trained and," with emphasis, "well paid. He is quick at recognizing the voices of my intimate friends. I happened to be in Washington in my, eh, town apartment," with a sidelong look at Kitty. "From there I have a direct wire to my switchboard in my house, and Lambert plugged in your call. You thought you were talking to me at 'Hideaway,' Rodgers, whereas I wasn't six blocks away from here.

"I told Lambert to take care of you until I got home, then hurried over here. I have a key to the side door. It took but an instant to slip upstairs to your room and to go through your desk. Mandy never woke up, but that infernal cat," with a vindictive snarl. "I wish I had strangled her. When I got back to 'Hideaway,' I found you and Kitty so engaged with each other that I knew you never realized the time I took to appear."

"So that was it!" Rodgers drew a long breath. "And you followed us and tried to shoot me in the Park!"

"Yes." Craige favored him with a scowl. "I got word yesterday that you were wise to the kind of life I was leading—you knew too much. I detected you watching me last night. If Kitty had not swerved her car when she did, I'd have potted you, for I'm a crack shot as a general thing."

"And did you throw the revolver into the car as you dashed by?" asked Kitty.

"Yes. I had tied a handkerchief loosely about the butt of the revolver so as not to leave finger prints," Craige added. "It was clever of you, Rodgers, to trace the handkerchief as you did. In my haste that night, I never noticed that I had one of Cecelia's handkerchiefs in my pocket and none of my own." He paused, his voice had grown husky. "Well, that clears up the mystery."

"All but Mrs. Parsons' part in it," broke in Rodgers. "Where did she come in, Craige?"

Craige's color mounted, then receded, leaving him deadly white.

"She cut a big splurge here," he began, "and soon went through her money. She found out about Miss Baird and came here early Monday morning, knowing that Kitty was spending the night with her cousins, hoping to borrow from Susan. She found the front door open, so she told me, and walked in. When she discovered Miss Baird lying dead in the library, she bolted home and called up the police."

"And why did she try to bribe Oscar?" demanded Kitty.

"She wanted some papers to prove that your aunt was a money-lender," Craige twisted about, his growing uneasiness plainly indicated by his avoidance of their gaze.

"In other words," cut in Mitchell. "Mrs. Parsons hoped to blackmail Miss Kitty Baird by threatening to expose her aunt's career."

Craige nodded sullenly. "Something like that," he admitted.

Rodgers had not taken his eyes from him. "Did Mrs. Parsons know that you wished to marry Kitty?" he asked.

Craige shifted his feet about. "No," he muttered.

"Did she know that you killed Miss Susan Baird?" Rodgers was persistent in his questioning.

"I'm not sure," Craige glanced up at him quickly, then dropped his eyes. The sight of his handcuffs sent a shiver down his spine and he again shifted his gaze.

"Mrs. Parsons done picked up dat ar' rubber ball befo' she left on Monday mawnin'," volunteered Oscar. The old man had been a fascinated witness of all that transpired; his face, gray from fright at the death of Cecelia Parsons, had regained its nor-

mal hue somewhat, but his eyes still bulged from his head.

"She did!" A startled look crept into Craige's ever-shifting eyes. "Why, I found the cat playing with the syringe when I first entered this room. I knew that I had dropped it on Sunday, probably when I reëntered the library after Susan Baird screamed." A shudder shook him, in spite of his iron self-control. "Seeing it here this afternoon, I supposed it had rolled in some corner, and been overlooked. I judged that the cat had selected it as a plaything."

"It's a wonder the cat didn't poison herself," commented Mitchell.

Craige's face was distorted into what he meant for a smile. "There wasn't a drop of poison left in the syringe," he said. "I considered finding it a direct act of Providence, for I expected trouble of some kind, and brought with me a small phial of a concentrated solution of crotalidae—"

"What's that?" asked Mitchell.

"Snake venom, and deadly when introduced into the blood," explained Craige. "It's sometimes used in drugs given by homoeopathists. During the few minutes I was alone in the library I put the poison in the syringe."

"But if Mrs. Parsons carried away the syringe on

Monday morning, how did it get back in this library to-day?" asked Kitty.

"She probably guessed that it was used to kill Miss Susan Baird in some way, and brought it back to incriminate Miss Kitty Baird," declared Mitchell. "Mrs. Parsons was as clever as they make them, but she overreached herself when she tried to involve you, Mr. Rodgers. I kept the wires to San Francisco hot until I found out that the papers she produced to prove that you were involved in the Holt will forgery were ones found in Gentleman Jake's house, when he and his confederates were trying to forge Holt's will." He turned to Craige. "Did you put Mrs. Parsons up to that deviltry, Mr. Craige?"

Craige ignored the question and Potter broke his long silence.

"I imagine he did," he said. "Mrs. Parsons was the divorced wife of Gentleman Jake, and later she married Amos Parsons. He left some property and she came east. She'd have lived straight, Craige, if it hadn't been for you."

"Craige," Mitchell's harsh voice made the lawyer turn with a nervous jump. "Did you conceal that small bottle of prussic acid in the ivory dice cup?"

"Yes," sullenly, then with a venomous glance at Kitty. "I hoped to involve you."

"You yellow devil!" Ted Rodgers rose and stepped toward him, but Mitchell intervened.

"The law will deal with him, Mr. Rodgers; stand back, Sir. Now, Craige, come on—" and, at a sign, Welsh, the detective, took his place by the lawyer.

Twice Craige tried to get upon his feet, only to sway back into his seat. He had aged in the past hour, and when he finally stood upright his shoulders sagged forward and his trembling knees seemed unable to support him.

"Catch him on the other side, Welsh," Mitchell directed. "Mr. Potter, please telephone to Coroner Penfield." With a jerk of his head he indicated the prone figure behind them. "Mrs. Parsons cannot be moved until he gets here. Come, Craige."

Craige moved forward a few hesitating steps and then halted. An irresistible attraction which he could not conquer drew his eyes toward Cecelia Parsons. Whatever emotion he felt he controlled admirably. He stood for a moment motionless, then, without glancing to right or left, he squared his shoulders and swinging around strode arrogantly from the library, the two men on either side walking rapidly to keep up with him.

The silence in the library grew oppressive and Kitty was conscious of a feeling almost of nausea when Nina Potter came toward her.

"Kitty," she said brokenly. "I did you a very

great wrong when I wore your red coat to come here on Sunday night with Leigh."

"Did you not do your husband a greater wrong?" Kitty asked swiftly.

"No." Nina flushed scarlet. "I am a coward, but I am a loyal wife."

"I am entirely to blame," Leigh Wallace turned and addressed Potter directly. "I was once engaged to your wife. We quarreled and she broke it off. I never saw or heard from her again until we met this winter. Nina would not let me pay her any attention, so, forgive me, Kitty, I went with you because I could be with Nina without arousing talk," he hesitated.

No one spoke, and, after an instant's pause, Wallace continued:

"On Saturday night Oscar brought me a note from Miss Susan Baird asking me to come here on Sunday at five o'clock. I did take the peaches from Mrs. Parsons' table on a silly impulse, for I knew Miss Baird was fond of them and thought that I could placate her with a gift.

"When I got here she told me how my father had jilted her and of her hatred of me. She declared that she had secured, through bribing one of Nina's servants, some old love letters of mine—they were undated, and she proposed showing them to Ben Potter. I tried in every way to induce her to return

them to me, even offering a large sum of money. She ordered me out of the house," he paused. "Then I went to Nina and asked her to see Miss Baird and try to get her to give up the letters."

"So I came over here with Leigh on Sunday night," Nina Potter took up the story. "Miss Susan had loaned me your red coat, Kitty, last Wednesday to wear home when it blew up so cold. The coat is distinctive in appearance, and—well—" she faltered —"I knew if any one saw me, there was a chance I might be mistaken for you. Afterwards I got rid of the coat by selling it to a second-hand dealer." She caught her husband's averted gaze and colored painfully.

"Leigh left me at the side door of 'Rose Hill,'" she added. "I entered the library—saw Miss Susan sitting there—dead—" she covered her eyes with her hand as if to shut out some terrifying vision and a shudder shook her. "I must have fainted, for it was late when I stole out of the house. I left by the front door, and in my terror I put the big key in the lock on the outside with some idea of locking poor Miss Susan in the house. I heard an automobile coming and ran away, forgetting to turn the key in the lock after all. When I got home I found Ben had not gotten in and that you were still asleep, Kitty—so—" she faltered again and glanced appealingly at her husband.

Potter stirred uneasily. "I drove around a bit," he said. "Kitty, as I thought, coming over here at that time of night with Wallace troubled me, and I wanted time to think things over. When I heard of Cousin Susan's murder—well, I—well, I kept silent until my jealousy of Wallace drove me to try and implicate Kitty and him in the crime.

"I saw you, Ted," he turned to Rodgers, "come out of a second-hand clothing store on Pennsylvania Avenue with Kitty's coat on your arm. The dealer told me that you had just paid twenty dollars for it. I decided that if the coat was worth that to you, it might be worth double the money to me; so I bribed the dealer to buy the coat back from you. When that scheme failed, I went to your apartment—"

"Where you failed again," broke in Rodgers. "Your coat was accidently burned up, Kitty, all except one pocket. In that pocket I found the clue which gave the the first inkling that Charles Craige might have murdered your aunt—"

"What was it?" demanded Kitty breathlessly.

"An 'I.O.U.,' which your aunt must have slipped inside the coat pocket and forgotten. The signature was obliterated, but I recognized Craige's handwriting," Rodgers explained. "It showed me that Craige was under heavy financial obligations to Miss Susan Baird while all the time he protested absolute ignor-

ance of her wealth. I immediately started to investigate Craige's career, and it was that investigation, as he said a few minutes ago, which forced his hand last night—"

"And he nearly killed you!" Kitty's eyes were shining as she faced her lover. "You endangered your life for me—"

Regardless of the others' presence Rodgers drew her to his side.

"Sweetheart," he murmured. "Sweetheart—"

"Ahem!" Ben Potter cleared his throat, and faced the others.

"Did you get your letters, Nina?" he asked, turning to his wife.

"Not then, only this afternoon," she explained. "I found them in a box under the mattress of Miss Susan's bed. Mrs. Parsons suspected that I was searching for something, for yesterday she told me that for a considerable sum of money she would aid me."

"That woman was a fiend incarnate!" ejaculated Rodgers.

"She sho'ly was, Sah," agreed Oscar. "She done her bes' to make me tell de police that ole Miss let people have money. Yo' see, Miss Kitty, ole Miss had me to help her, an' I promised never to tell, an' I never broke my promise, never."

"Oscar!" Kitty's eyes were dim with tears as she laid her hand on the faithful servant's shoulder. "Where did you disappear yesterday?"

"Jes' went down to my rooms an' laid low," promptly. "Mandy an' me thought things were gettin' kinda critical 'round hyar. Las' night I heered yo' an' Mister Rodgers a-plannin' to see Mister Craige, an' then I went home again, scared stiff."

"Wait, Oscar—" Rodgers interrupted him quickly. "Why did you ask me to find Miss Kitty's red coat?"

"I seen some one a-wearin' dat coat enter dis house as I was passin' along de street late Sunday night," the negro explained. "I couldn't swear it warn't yo', Miss Kitty, an' I couldn't swear it were; but I calculated dat whoever t'was might a lef' somethin' in de coat pockets to tell on them."

"It was a clever thought," exclaimed Rodgers. "But it would have been better had you taken me entirely into your confidence, Oscar."

"Yessir." But Oscar looked doubtful. "I was mighty concarned 'bout Miss Kitty, 'deed I was, Sah. It warn't 'till jes' a spell back that that detecertif man, Mister Welsh, who tried to find me in Front Royal an' at las' found me to home, 'splained to me I had orter be hyar wif yo', Honey, Miss Kitty, so then I comed round wif him."

Leigh Wallace heard the old man to the end, then stared moodily across the library. He started for the doorway and turned around.

"I've destroyed your letters, Nina," he said. "I, forgive me, I feared that you had killed Miss Susan Baird on Sunday night. That was why I was so overcome when the crime was discovered. Mr. Potter," he spoke with deep feeling. "Your wife loves you devotedly. I am but a forgotten incident in her life. I received my orders for foreign service to-day. Good-by." He clicked his heels together and with a bow which included all in the library, turned and strode from the room.

At sound of the front door closing, Potter stepped forward. He was oblivious of any one's presence but his wife.

"Nina, can you forgive me?" he asked humbly. "I have acted the part of a jealous fool."

Nina's answer was not in words. With a face in which joy obliterated the shadow of the past few days, she slipped her arm within his and he led her from the room.

"Doan yo' wait hyar, Miss Kitty—" Oscar came forward a pace. "Jes' you an' Mister Rodgers go right along. I'll stay wid dis—" and he nodded significantly at Rodgers. The latter turned to take a last survey of the library. Not far from Cecelia

Parsons lay a small furry body—both were rigid in death.

"Come, sweetheart—" Rodgers slipped his arm around Kitty and they walked toward the drawing room. Once there Kitty gave way to the grief consuming her.

"Poor Aunt Susan—how could Charles Craige have had the heart to kill her!" she exclaimed. "He was her trusted friend."

"He was a man of masks," Rodgers said gravely. "A man of character, well educated, a social favorite and a brilliant lawyer, but heredity proved too strong for him." And as Kitty looked at him in question, he added, "Were you not aware that his father died insane?"

Kitty shook her head. "I never knew it," she said. "How dreadful! The whole affair—Aunt Susan's death—her life, oh, Ted, her life!"

"Hush!" Rodgers laid his finger gently on her lips. "Let us forget the tragedy in our happiness."

Glancing shyly upward, Kitty read the worship in his eyes and her rapidly beating heart sang a glad response.

"All my life I have prayed for love," she murmured as he took her in his arms; "even when I was only a little lonely child—and now to feel such hap-

piness as I never even imagined. To have you with me always—"

"In our Kingdom of Love"—Rodgers' tender, caressing voice was melody in her ears—"My queen —my queen!"

THE END

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